

Library Crisis

by Arikawa Hiro

Declaration of Library Freedom

- 1. Libraries have the right to gather materials freely.**
- 2. Libraries have the right to make materials freely available.**
- 3. Libraries protect the privacy of their users.**
- 4. Libraries oppose all censorship.**

When the freedom of the library is violated, we librarians will unite and fight to the end to protect its freedom.

Chapter 1, Leaving the Prince Behind

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"No! Give it back!" Seeing the Improvement trooper was about to throw the book into the container, Iku grabbed his arm and clung tightly.

"Let go! Or do you want to go to the police for flagrant shoplifting?"

For an instant, her heart froze at this hurled threat. Wait, no. I'm not a shopli-- Suddenly looking at the people around her, she saw the distressed middle-aged shop owner shaking his head at her. Don't defy them, he was saying.

He knows. He understands why I did it. Her stomach constricted.

"Fine! I'll go! Manager, call the police and tell them I'm a shoplifter! I'll go to the station with this book that I stole!" After all, without the stolen merchandise one couldn't prove a charge of shoplifting. The commander tsked, annoyed.

"Shut up and let go!" He thrust her away with all his strength--

But the second before she fell spectacularly on her backside, someone caught her. When she turned around, she found a young man in a suit holding her up with one hand.

Slipping gently to the ground, Iku looked up and watched as the young man stepped up to the Improvement trooper and peremptorily plucked the book out of his hand.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The young man reached into an inside pocket and pulled out something that looked like a badge. Brandishing it at the angry man, he announced, "This is the Kantou Library Force! I hereby choose to exercise my right as a Library Officer Third Class to gather materials freely, as accorded in the Library Laws, Article Thirty! By the authority granted to me by the Library Law enforcement regulations, I designate these books as my discretionary selection!"

She watched from behind as the man made this declaration in a ringing voice. A single phrase popped into her seething brain.

--This is a champion of justice.

Iku was having a dream.

She was dreaming about the Library Officer who had saved her five--no, it was six by now--years ago. He had protected her from the Improvement trooper who was trying to confiscate the censored book Iku was trying to buy, and had become Iku's inspiration to join the Library Force. She didn't remember his face--didn't know his name--he was simply a symbol of all she admired.

The reason she knew she was dreaming was that she had already had the same dream three or four times that night.

In her imagination, the Library Officer was taller than she, but in the course of replaying the incident over and over again, she had realized that she had never once stood in front of him. When he had first intervened on her behalf, she had let his arms guide her to the floor, and after the whole thing was over, she had been sitting in a chair because of a twisted ankle and he hadn't made her stand up.

She had never seen him from anything but a low angle, and her bad memory for faces was legendary. She had once approached the Library Base commander--whose face every Library Force member should have known--and called him "sir" as if he were a patron.

She had probably forgotten her savior's face in the chaos of her ordeal. To Iku, the Library Officer personified a "champion of justice," and she could safely admire him and strive after him precisely because she didn't know his identity.

Like how you can squeal all you want when you see an idol on TV, because you know he can't hear you?

There's nothing pleasant about him being able to hear you from the very beginning!

Since Shibasaki had roundly scolded her before, she had developed the skill of jumping out of bed instead of screaming again.

But she was breathing heavily as she sprang to her feet. The more she thought back, the more she squirmed, as memory after memory was unearthed.

At the interview portion of her enlistment exams, during which she had babbled on about the Library Officer she revered, all of her current superiors had been present. How could she have known that Doujou, who halfway through the interview hadn't been able to hold his head up and had almost keeled over onto the desk, and would later become her immediate superior, was the very Library Officer she was babbling about?

It was like explaining in careful detail exactly why you liked the person you had a crush on, while they were present. She had even called the man from her past "her prince," and confessed her love for him, in front of the man himself!

And once she had finally gotten past those numerous humiliations, there still remained one, the most humiliating and worrying of all.

The level of his head might be lower than hers, but he had more than enough spine to make up for it. He might be a bellowing, glowering, terrifying demon instructor, but he was more reassuring than anyone in the world when he was at her back.

How did he feel about Iku now? Every time she brought up the prince story, he had acted like she was a gigantic thorn in his side. Which could only mean--

Instructor Doujou hates me.

Every time she opened her eyes that night, she inevitably reached that conclusion.

And every time she closed her eyes again, hot tears leaked from beneath her lids.

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The next morning, she looked awful. Her eyes were puffy from crying herself to sleep over and over, and her face was still swollen even after washing it.

"Why do you look so terrible again this morning?" Shibasaki brought her some water from the kitchen, but the swelling had only slightly improved by the time they had to leave for work.

"I had kind of a bad dream."

"Are you *still* trying to use that line on me?" Shibasaki said, eyebrows raised, then shrugged. "Have it your way--I'm going to work," she said, leaving the room.

I wonder if she's mad. But I just can't tell her about this.

"The prince that I admired is actually my boss. I think he hates me. And for some reason, that's a really painful thought."

It's almost like--I love Instructor Doujou or something--

She was this close to pretending to be sick and taking the day off, but in the end she pulled on her running clothes--she had spent so much time debating with herself that would be late if she walked to the office in her business attire.

Anyway, Tedzuka Satoshi had entrusted her with a task. Her parents had drilled into her since she was young that it was always best to quickly settle matters that involved money.

"Damn--what happened to you!?"

Doujou had been ready to scold her for her near-tardiness, but after taking one look at her face his prepared speech went out the window.

"She looks like she's been crying her eyes out!" Komaki made his way over to her without hesitation. Tedzuka, being either disconcerted or not wanting to get involved, kept a discreet distance.

"It's NOTHING. I'm sorry I'm late. More importantly." Speaking in brisk tones so that her quavering voice couldn't give the lie to her words, she drew a crisp 10,000 yen bill from the envelope Satoshi had sent her, which she had shoved in her pocket before leaving.

"Instructor Doujou, here."

She couldn't look him in the eye while she believed that he hated her, so she averted her eyes.

"What is this?"

"It's from Tedzuka's brother. He said he wanted to reimburse you. He sent 20,000 yen, and since you and I decided to split the cost I'm giving you your half."

The moment she said it, Doujou's expression changed. "You got a letter--from Tedzuka Satoshi? What did he say to you!? Show it to me!!"

Guessing a direct connection between her tear-swollen face and the contents of the letter, he tried to snatch it from her.

"You've got it all wrong! This is..."

Idiot! Why didn't I bring just the money? she cursed herself, but the damage was done. Her sleep deprivation had destroyed her attention, and she had been flustered by her near-lateness.

"But that's my brother's handwriting!!" Tedzuka oh-so-helpfully confirmed from a distance.

Doujou's blood pressure increased further. "Just hand it over! If that letter is what's bothering you, I'll pass judgement on the contents!"

"Hey, calm down, everyone. You don't know for a fact that that letter is the cause of her distress, and anyway her personal correspondence is private."

Even Komaki's eminently sensible intercession just increased the irrational tension.

"It's possible he may be using personal correspondence to shake her up!"

It was true that the letter had shaken her like a major earthquake--but she couldn't let them know that.

"Sure, I look like a weepy mess today, but this letter has nothing to do with it! Nothing was in the envelope except the money and instructions to return it!"

"If that's the case, you should have no problem showing it to me!"

"Doujou!" Komaki, unwilling to let this behavior continue, tried a more forceful intercession. But Doujou rejected it with equal force.

"After what happened the last time she got embroiled in his schemes? *I* will make the decisions where Tedzuka Satoshi is concerned!"

--They say that in emergencies, humans can perform otherwise impossible physical feats. This must have been one of those times.

Iku had no memory of the next five seconds--the last thing she remembered was Doujou trying to grab the envelope from her--

--And when she came to, there was a horrifying *bam* and Doujou was lying senseless on the floor between the row of desks.

"Doujou!!" This time Komaki wasn't shouting in disagreement, but in concern. Members of other squads gathered, their faces pale. There was no response from Doujou.

"Nooooooooooooo!" Iku clung to Doujou and wailed. "Instructor Doujou!? Instructor Doujou!! I'm sorry, I didn't mean it, my body moved on its own! No, come on, answer me, I don't want you to diiiiiiiiie!!!"

"...Tedzuka, cart Kasahara-san off somewhere else. She's in the way," Komaki ordered with a look of surprise. "He's probably just got a concussion. We'll carry him to the infirmary."

Tedzuka "carted" Iku to the training dojo, and there she heard what had happened during those missing five seconds.

"It was a beautiful leg-sweeping throw. Though it's not a technique that should have been used where there wasn't enough space to fall safely..."

As Doujou had tried to take the envelope, Iku had grabbed him, yanked him close, and flipped him over with all her strength.

"Usually your opponent wouldn't fly that far...Well, Officer Doujou was unprepared, and you have the advantage of height over him. You're gonna live on in legend as the woman who dealt Officer Doujou his most magnificent defeat."

This was all too likely, as the Task Force was full of men who got carried away often, from Genda on down. But the thought depressed Iku, since it was the kind of thing that would make Doujou hate her even more.

"So was there *really* nothing important in that letter?"

The thought was clearly bothering Tedzuka.

"It had nothing to do with work or anything serious. Honest. It's just that..." She heaved a giant sigh. "Your brother is *really* good at pushing other people's buttons..."

"I have sympathy for you, that he treated you so poorly that you figured that out after your only encounter with him. As his brother, I apologize deeply for his behavior."

His apology sounded like a government statement. Iku laughed a little.

The door suddenly opened. "Ah, that's where you were." It was Komaki. "Tedzuka, go and join Aoki's squad for marksmanship practice. I'll bring Kasahara-san once she's calmed down a bit."

"Yes, sir," Tedzuka replied, standing up.

Iku began to rise too. "I'm fine. I'll go join practice too."

"I can't let you do that yet. It would put too much of a burden on the other squad to send you to them when you're still keyed up. I couldn't send you to any exercise involving guns, at any rate."

After Tedzuka left the dojo, Komaki answered Iku's unspoken question.

"You don't have to worry about Doujou. They said after an hour or so of rest he should wake up on his own."

"Thank God," Iku said, close to tears again.

"And--this might be a prying question, but there was something significant in Tedzuka Satoshi's letter, wasn't there?"

This gentle deduction was impossible to deny. Iku's head drooped and she stared at her knees. Doujou's behavior might have been irrational, but Iku's determined refusal had been equally strange. By going so far as to throw a superior officer to keep him away from the letter, she might as well have confessed aloud that there was something significant in it.

Komaki had known that, but had still tried to stop Doujou and defend her right to privacy.

"If it's something you can't tell Doujou, what about me? I am technically one of your superior officers. It must be a heavy burden to carry all by yourself, to make you cry so much."

If Doujou had been the North Wind, Komaki was a perfect Sun.

"Will you *promise* not to tell Instructor Doujou?" Iku clung to Komaki's shoulder. "Tetzuka Satoshi said...he said that Instructor Doujou was my prince."

For a moment, she hoped that Komaki would laugh off this claim as absurd. But Komaki was wearing a terribly uncomfortable expression. At length, he raised his eyes to the ceiling. "...the man loves his juvenile mischief, it seems."

Not even Iku was stupid enough not to know that Komaki had just confirmed the fact.

"I--I was free to admire my prince because I didn't know who he was--I never imagined it would be Instructor Doujou, so I compared Instructor Doujou to my prince all the time--I said so many awful things--I said that my prince had inspired me to join the Library Force, but no child would ever join the Force because they were inspired by Instructor Doujou."

"Ouch, that must have been a major critical hit!" Komaki murmured pityingly. Iku's memories rewound back to that conversation:

"But, if you had been the one in the bookstore with me that day, I wouldn't have wanted to join the Library Force!"

She had hurled this criticism at him with the most caustic sarcasm she could muster, trying to make Doujou angry. Instead, he had looked like she had slapped him--like she had really hurt him--

"...S-so many awful things."

When I met my long-admired prince, I wanted to thank him for saving me, and tell him that I had come this far because I was following in his footsteps. But instead--

I wounded him by saying the worst possible things.

"It's only natural that Instructor Doujou hates me..." Iku hugged her knees, on the verge of tears again.

Komaki gave her a strange look. "Wait, what? How did you suddenly reach that conclusion?"

"'Cause I'm ungrateful and I say terrible things and I'm incompetent and stupid and all I do is fight with him--" Her throat tightened and her voice grew small. "And Instructor Doujou always looked so disgusted when I talked about my prince. It could only mean that the fact that he was my prince disgusted him."

"Wow, that's where you're coming from?" Komaki folded his arms, looking grim. He muttered to himself for a moment--"Maybe it's hard to understand the subtle inner workings of a man five years older..."--then spoke. "Right now you seem to be wallowing in self-loathing, but rest assured that Doujou does not hate you, at the very least as a subordinate. He values you very much, and to ignore that fact would be cruel to him."

Cruel to him. The words grated against her heart.

When she had been tormented by Tedzuka Satoshi, Doujou had been the one outside banging on the windowpane. Before he had caught his breath, he had said, "This is my subordinate," and dragged Iku out with him.

Whenever Iku got into trouble, it was Doujou who always came for her--just like a champion of justice.

"He doesn't hate you--if anything, it's the opposite: he's overprotective of you. I've even told him as much, and said that if he can't make use of you, he should let another squad have you."

This new revelation shook her. *Just as I thought, Instructor Doujou has a hard time finding a use for me.*

As if he could read her mind, Komaki threw up a restraining hand. "No, no, it's completely Doujou's problem. To draw up battle plans that purposely exclude someone with valuable combat abilities is over the line, even in the name of protecting them."

"But--then--why--"

If Doujou didn't hate Iku--

"Why is he so nasty about my prince? All I can think of is that he wants me to hate my prince--hate *him*--and keep away from him! And--" Iku huddled into a tight ball. "For some reason it's really painful to think about Instructor Doujou hating me."

"Ah, so that's why you were crying," Komaki nodded in approval. "You're confused because you suddenly found out the identity of your prince."

Iku raised her head, drawn in by this gentle, apt surmise.

"When Doujou rejects his identity as your prince, it's painful because for you, it's like being rejected by someone you love."

Iku nodded vigorously in instinctive agreement.

She didn't have the spare attention to realize that she had also agreed to the possibility that she loved Doujou.

"Try your best to calm down. The undeniable fact that you admired your prince, and that you gushed about him in front of the man himself, means that your perception of him hasn't changed in--what is it now, six years? Right now you couldn't say if you liked Doujou or not if you tried, and finding out that he was actually your prince just makes it worse.

"Look at Doujou as he is now, not because he was your prince. Look at Doujou, your strict, merciless superior who you've been bickering and squabbling with since you joined the Force." Komaki added with a wry grin, "If you don't, he'll never rest in peace either."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll understand when you both figure it out. I'm not going to tell you." Komaki's tone was unyielding, so Iku didn't bother to ask more. "Well, when you're feeling calmer, come join practice. Today I'll be instructing you personally, so come and find me. And one more thing..." Komaki paused just outside the door to the dojo. "Kasaharasan, when you think of yourself as you were six years go, how do you feel?"

Forgotten memories of mistakes and youthful indiscretions welled up within her at the question, and Iku cried, "Embarrassed!" before

she could stop herself. "...and nostalgic, and a lot of other things," she added in a small voice.

Komaki grinned. "Would it make you feel a little better if I told you we feel the same way?"

And with that, Komaki left the dojo.

Iku leaned her head against the wall and looked up at the ceiling.

Maybe Instructor Doujou gets embarrassed when I talk about that time in his life?

The thought soothed her chaotic feelings a little.

For the time being, she would hide the fact that she knew her prince's identity from Doujou.

And then she would try to go back to square one. She would stop praising her prince to the skies, stop comparing Doujou unfavorably to him, and work diligently in her role as Doujou's subordinate.

That would probably fulfill Komaki's exhortation to "look at Doujou as he is now."

It was a few days after Iku had made this decision that it happened.

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Marié was sitting in the office of the Administrative Division, trying to hold back her sobs. She hadn't touched the black tea that her companion Shibasaki had made for her. She didn't have the energy or thought to spare.

Shibasaki understood this full well.

Marié was waiting for a single person, who was at this moment rushing on his way to her, and no one but that single person could awaken her from her paralysis.

The sound of hurried footsteps came closer and closer, and with an alarming *bang* the door slammed open.

"Marié-chan!?"

The other members had probably sensitively considered the situation and Marié's feelings, so it was Komaki alone who flew into the room.

Marié stood up so fast that she kicked the chair over and buried herself in Komaki's chest. Clutching his uniform shirt tightly, she wept in a choked voice.

Even at a time like this, the girl, who had a hearing disability, was gauging how loudly her voice resounded in the ears of the others, and could only cry choked-back sobs.

Komaki held Marié unhesitatingly and asked Shibasaki, "What happened?"

Most regrettably, the perpetrator had gotten away, but Shibasaki explained the situation in as simple terms as possible.

Marié had been looking for a book as usual.

After a while, she had become aware of a man standing conspicuously close to her. At first, she had thought she was imagining things and moved away from him, but he followed her. As she tried to get away from him, he backed her into an unpopulated corner--

"Before she could raise her voice, he sexually molested her."

Through speaking and writing, Marié had given Shibasaki this account.

Marié hadn't been able to raise her voice for several reasons--she was scared; she was conditioned not to raise her voice in a library; and she had a very strong aversion to speaking because of her difficulty with volume control.

"Did you catch the perpetrator!?"

It was rare for Komaki to raise his voice.

"I'm sorry, he got away."

When a librarian found them and tried to summon security, he had pushed her aside and fled.

"Goddammit!..."

It was equally rare for Komaki to use vulgar language.

"I'm going to take her home. Could I ask you to tell Doujou?"

"Gladly. Please do your best to soothe her. Being questioned afterward was no picnic for her either."

If we catch the culprit, we might have take steps to ensure his safety from that temper, Shibasaki thought as she watched them leave. After they were gone, she wrote her name and destination on the office whiteboard, and left herself.

She was headed for the office of the Library Task Force.

"Sexual assault?" Genda repeated, in the same tone one might use for "rotting garbage."

Shibasaki, who had wandered into the Task Force office as usual, nodded matter-of-factly. "Yep. Upskirt photos, groping, peeping-- indecent acts like that."

Doujou's squad was also present.

"An official request should be coming down soon, but because of our close ties I thought I'd give all you a heads-up. At any rate, the perpetrator has provoked Instructor Komaki's wrath, so this squad will probably stand out as the natural choice."

Doujou's squad had been informed of what had happened to Marié and had sent Komaki to the Administrative Division's office. Genda was the only one of them who didn't know the whole story.

"Upskirt--...does that sort of knavish behavior really happen at the library?" Genda asked with a scowl. No one was cruel enough to laugh at his outdated language.

Shibasaki spun around to look at Iku. "It's pretty common, isn't it? At bookstores too."

"Uh, yeah..." Iku blushed and nodded, unable to be as blithe as Shibasaki.

"Patrons let their guard down because they don't think it would happen in a place like this, plus they're concentrating on their books and they pay surprisingly little attention to what's happening at their feet. That applies to librarians and store employees too. It's never happened to me at the library, but I can't count the number of times I've been photographed at a bookstore. You know, 'cause I'm such a hottie."

Everyone laughed blackly at Shibasaki's glib declaration.

Shibasaki tried to pass the ball to Iku. "It's happened to you once or twice, hasn't it?"

What, you want me to say that here? Here!?

She was quite reluctant, but when she looked at the expressions of her male colleagues, who had only a vague image of the kind of indecent behavior that could take place at a bookstore or library, she felt that she had no choice but to provide an example.

"Umm, in high school my uniform included a skirt, and sometimes I'd be reading a book and the guy standing next to me would crouch down before I noticed...and look up my skirt...or sometimes take a picture with his cell phone. Sometimes I'd think someone's bag was brushing up against me, and it'd be someone touching my butt."

"What a scumbag," Tedzuka spat with the vehemence of youth.

Doujou looked as if he had bitten into a lemon. "When that happens, does the--the guy, just..."

"Sometimes security or a store employee would see him and prevent it from happening, or nab him afterwards. But usually by the time I thought, 'Wait, was that...?' the guy had already pulled a hit and run."

Shit, "hit" is not the kind of language a respectable unmarried woman should be using! She wanted to howl, and not because of the unpleasant memories.

"Library shelves are open at the back, all the way to the bottom shelf. Someone can create a gap ahead of time, crouch behind the shelf, and when a woman comes by..." Shibasaki didn't complete the thought. Everyone was again wearing expressions normally reserved for rotting garbage.

"There's already been a memo about it sent to the local bookstores, but incidents like this seem to be on the rise. Maybe it's the latest fad among perverts. The police have said that they'll increase patrolling of bookstores, but as usual, they are disinclined to help out the library, since they have a policy of noninvolvement in Justice Department matters."

"Even at a time like this!? Hello, there are girls being victimized!?" Iku snapped before she could stop herself.

Shibasaki waved a hand as if to deflect Iku's rage. "Increasing patrols isn't really going to have any effect. Until something happens, all the police can do is try to implement preventative measures, so it doesn't make any difference if they assist us or not. Even the shop owners are shaking their heads and saying 'I don't know how much help uniformed police officers will be...'"

No one would be stupid enough to take out a spy camera in the presence of a conspicuous police officer. In the end, all they could do was put up posters urging women to be careful in bookstores, and warn store employees to be on the lookout.

"Waaaait a minute. I'll be damned if this isn't the perfect opportunity for us." Genda leaned forward. "Basically, to reduce this kind of villainy, we need to put a big mountain in front of the villains. Nothing prevents the Library Force from doing all the surveillance and running all the sting operations it wants. If we catch one of these bastards red-handed and hand him over to the police, it'll make a big splash in the papers. That's the most effective way to keep these

schmucks in line. We can also urge our patrons to help in their own defense."

"Ah, after all, sting operations aren't on the list of forbidden activities for the Library Force," Shibasaki smiled wickedly. Section Four of the Library Laws had been written broadly, to provide the Force with enough freedom to combat the Media Improvement Act. The law, supplemented with enforcement orders, gave the Library Force the right to carry out investigations "in matters that concern the library." It was an extraordinary vague limitation.

"Was Marié-chan okay?" This was the question that concerned Iku the most. Not to say that the men *didn't* care, or weren't angry on Marié's behalf, but the difference between the way men and women felt about this problem was enormous.

"Naturally it was a big shock for her. Before Instructor Komaki arrived, she was practically catatonic."

It was difficult for men to imagine the sick, terrifying feeling of being groped uninvited by brutish hands. Plus, there were few women who could quickly change that terror to fury. Even the pugnacious Iku needed time before she could give herself over to her anger and take action.

On top of that, the average woman was ashamed to have the people around her know what had happened, so raising one's voice and calling for help was an act that required courage. And for Marié to raise her voice, she required even more courage than a hearing person would.

It wasn't the kind of fear or creeping disgust that faded immediately once a lover one trusted had rushed to one's side. Even one incident could easily create long-lasting trauma.

It was only natural for a person to not want to allow anyone but the people they loved to touch their own skin. For someone to violate this rule simply because their victim was weaker than they were was absolutely unforgivable.

And--taking advantage of defenseless women in a place where booklovers gather! And--

ON OUR TURF!!

"...Let's make sure and catch the bastard," Iku said in a tone of steely determination.

"I like the way you're thinking." Doujou smiled encouragingly.

--Can I go ahead and believe he doesn't hate me...? He did end up forgiving me for throwing him. Reflecting these private thoughts, she let a little bit of relief show on her face.

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During the walk home, Marié kept a tight grip on Komaki's sleeve. Through the fabric, he could feel her hand as it trembled slightly.

Komaki had planned to spend the walk home asking Marié questions about the incident, such as whether she had seen the perpetrator's face. But such a thing was unthinkable now. As he glimpsed her out of the corner of his eye occasionally wiping away tears, he understood that now was not the time to mention it at all.

It was all she could do to just hold on to his sleeve.

He didn't know if it was all right to touch her; it might bring back painful memories of the incident instead of soothing her. Though she was more hurt and frightened than he had ever seen her, he didn't know how to help her. The knowledge of his inadequacy rankled. And to think, he had been planning to question her.

Thus, until right before they reached Marié's home, Komaki's hands hung uselessly at his sides and their only point of contact was her grip on his sleeve.

When her house was visible, Marié stopped him. "Komaki-san," she said in a hoarse voice. "Can you please overwrite it?"

Komaki, not understanding her meaning, gave her a puzzled look.

Tears dripped steadily from Marié's eyes. "When I get home, I don't want the last person who touched me to be that man."

It didn't matter that they were close to home and their neighbors might see them. The little bit of distance they always purposely kept between them wasn't important. If Marié wanted an "overwrite," that took priority right now.

Komaki pulled Marié to him and hugged her tightly--almost painfully so. He wanted her to feel like he was putting all his strength into embracing her. He held back, though, because for the first time he could feel how slender and delicate her body was. He realized how carefully and tenderly he needed to treat it.

And he once again felt a profound rage toward the criminal who had tried to use that body for his own lecherous purposes.

He leaned down to whisper into Marié's ear--the one with the hearing aid. "Don't come to the library until I say it's okay. I'll bring you any book you want to read. I promise you, I will make that library a place you can feel safe visiting again."

Marié nodded and left the protective circle of his arms, and Komaki escorted her home. Marié went up to her room on the second floor, giving him space, and Komaki went to tell Marié's mother what had happened.

"Please take extra good care of her for a while. And if you could keep her from coming to the library..."

At that, Marié's mother gave a pained laugh. "Of course I will. But I think seeing you is going to help her spirits the most, Mikihisakun. I know you must be busy, but I hope you'll give her as much of your attention as you can."

From her slightly lonely expression and tone of voice, Komaki wondered if perhaps Marié's parents had realized how their relationship had changed.

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After one look at Komaki's face when he returned to the Task Force office, Iku flinched and hunched her shoulders. In the next seat over, Tedzuka was having a similar reaction. The two of them put their heads together under their desks and whispered to each other.

"Yikes!" Iku hissed. "I thought he'd be scary, but I never dreamed he'd be *this* scary."

"Is it just my imagination, or are there huge dark shadows under his eyes?"

"It must be, you know, that thing--psychological warpaint that only we can see."

"Well, there's no way Officer Komaki could be anything but furious. He endured that hearing entirely for Marié-chan's sake."

"You know, I thought *I* was plenty furious, but come on, this is just ridiculous!"

As Iku and Tedzuka observed from a safe distance, Komaki returned to his seat and looked around. "Where's Shibasaki-san?" He probably wanted to question her more thoroughly about what had happened.

In her stead, Doujou stood up. "She went back to her duties with the Administrative Division. It's already been an hour, after all." As he

spoke, he pressed a sheaf of papers to Komaki's chest. "Here's a copy of the statements of those involved, along with Shibasaki's impressions. When you've read that, and you're confident you can keep your temper under control, let me know, and we'll call a council of war."

Komaki gave him a wry smile and accepted the documents.

Even for their two subordinates, it was a rare display of role reversal for the normally hot-headed Doujou to be calming down the normally serene Komaki.

The perpetrator was a young man of average height and weight; this lack of distinguishing features was a stumbling block for the investigation. The librarian who had come running over to them at the last minute had reported that he wore glasses and carried a very large professional-looking shoulder bag, though his attire was casual. During his escape, his bag had smacked into the librarian and hurt quite a bit; from that, they conjectured that the contents of the bag were correspondingly heavy.

"Ooh, ooh, I have a theory!" Shibasaki--who for some reason was included in their war council--raised her hand. "Do you suppose he's got camera equipment in that bag--for taking upskirt pictures? It's a pretty common technique--make a little hole in the bag somewhere, put it down by a girl's feet, and by angling the bag right you can take pictures without anybody noticing."

Women were more knowledgeable than men about the tricks perverts used--and Shibasaki was even more knowledgeable than most. The men in the room looked almost hypnotized as they listened. Men who had no perverted desires had no need to seek out such information. But women sometimes learned about these techniques the hard way, and they also shared what they knew with other women so they would know how to avoid them.

However, between them, Shibasaki had the more talkative personality, and it was all Iku could do to reinforce Shibasaki's points. "It would mean he's a well-prepared, calculating son of a bitch."

Doujou's expression was flinty. "That's true--although there's not much difference between him and some opportunistic prick with a cell phone camera, to the woman being victimized."

Iku bobbed her head in fervent agreement.

Then Komaki, his arms folded and his expression terrifying as ever, cut in in a low voice. "What *is* different about him compared to

casual opportunists is the amount of trouble he takes to conceal his deeds."

"Ah, good catch, Instructor Komaki," Shibasaki said, looking surprised. "He's a repeat offender. If we circulated his description around the city, we might catch him."

Tedzuka continued with this line of reasoning and offered an insightful idea. "If this is true, then in a sense his shoulder bag identifies him. He might own more than one, but we know he'll be carrying a bag that looks like it could conceal photography equipment."

"Ah, and that becomes his distinguishing feature!" Iku clapped her hands together. "No one remembers what his face looked like, except that he wore glasses."

Shibasaki grinned. "Actually, the librarian who found them remembers his glasses very well. She tried to memorize his face, and in the confusion memorized his glasses instead, apparently."

The librarian had gotten her priorities mixed up, but it was touching the way she had tried so hard.

"They were coke-bottle lenses in very unfashionable frames that distorted his facial features. I don't think a pervert who carefully assembles an upskirt photography kit has the fashion sense to wear contacts. If he did, he'd be wearing different glasses."

Genda thumped both knees. "Our prey is coming into view."

After evading capture, the perpetrator probably wouldn't take the time and money to get new glasses. It was questionable whether he would even realize that his glasses were among his distinguishing features.

This was their criminal profile: a man of medium build with thick glasses and a bag that looked like it could contain upskirt photography equipment.

"But how can we tell if he really has a camera in his bag...?" Iku murmured.

"I have a plan," Genda replied, then gave orders to Doujou's squad plus Shibasaki to set aside a day in the near future when they could leave the base. "And for our bait, we have one...two?"

Shibasaki, as the first "bait" to be mentioned, smiled fiercely. But Iku, the second, stiffened like a board.

"M-me!? Me too!?"

"What's the point of having a woman in the Task Force if we can't use you for operations like this? What else are we gonna do, put Tedzuka in a dress?"

Genda's reasoning was sound, but--

"Um, not everyone is suited for this kind of operation--"

"A woman from the Administrative Division is helping out, but a woman from the Task Force is too chicken!?"

He was saying she was weak. But.

"Look, I'm a 170 centimeter giantess who beats people up for a living! I don't think we're going to catch any perverts using me as bait! I'd feel much more confident about being the one to arrest him!"

"Didn't you tell us you'd been groped before?"

"That was the magic of the schoolgirl uniform!"

"Fine, then we'll leave it to the judgement of your immediate superior. Doujou, do you think she'd make good bait?"

You're asking HIM to decide THAT? HERE!? Iku was shrieking inside. Agitated, she looked over at Doujou.

The moment their eyes met, he looked away. He folded his arms and said in an exceedingly neutral tone, "Why not. We don't know what the perpetrator's type is, so we might as well have more than one kind of bait."

"Damn but that sounded cold. Why don't you try and get her a little more enthusiastic about it?"

"Because I've seen what happens when she gets enthusiastic."

You don't have to worry about me getting enthusiastic about my appearance, Iku thought sourly.

Shibasaki slipped an arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry, I can make you into bait that looks good enough to eat. As long as you're prepared to get eaten."

Shibasaki's honeyed whisper had never sounded so sinister.

*

"So this is why you contacted me out of the blue?"

Genda, Doujou's squad, and Shibasaki were gathered in the hallway of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. Scowling at them was Hiraga, one of the investigators who had aided them for a time when Commander Inamine was kidnapped after the battle for the Museum of Information History.

"Our history together has not been so auspicious that we can believe you won't double-cross us." With that statement, Genda had ended the cooperative effort between the police and the Library Force. Genda had guts to go and visit the man he had addressed those words

to. Of the others, the only one who didn't look uncomfortable was Shibasaki.

"Sorry about rejecting your assistance the last time. I thought we could make it up to you by asking for your help in this."

"Do I get a choice about it?" Hiraga asked gloomily. "Well, come on." He jerked his chin toward the interior of the station, then stood up and led them there.

The place where the party was conducted was apparently a storeroom for evidence and confiscated materials.

"Equipment for taking upskirt pictures, you said?" Hiraga asked, opening up a cardboard box. He produced several bags and cases and lined them up on a long table.

The men picked up the equipment curiously and examined it. Of them, Komaki was the only one whose face was totally expressionless. *Eep, he's angry, he's angry!* Iku thought. She had no interest in fiddling with the equipment and satisfied herself with watching from the sidelines. She didn't trust herself not to break something by touching it funny--she knew herself at least that well.

"You said the bag that bumped up against your librarian was heavy--if so, it's gotta be a video camera with a pinhole lens. Your verdict was spot-on, girl. It's the cheapest and quickest route, and a well-trodden one at that." The situation had been more or less explained to Hiraga beforehand. "Nowadays most perps use digital cameras, because they're lighter and have better image quality. There are some that can be completely concealed within the palm of your hand--the smaller the camera, the harder it is to catch the guy. Some models also have a very long recording time. To use a pinhole camera these days either means he's been using the same one for many years--"

"Or that he doesn't have the money for something better," Shibasaki finished smoothly for him, smiling like a cat.

"Ah--yes," Hiraga stammered, apparently falling under Shibasaki's magic spell.

Whatever the reason, it seemed their perpetrator didn't have much in the way of fancy equipment.

"If that's the case, we just have to be on the lookout for a bag about the same size as the original one, right?"

"Once the heat is off, he may come with the very same bag. Switching bags probably takes effort--balancing the equipment,

aligning the pinhole, that kind of thing. And making it easy to use." Hiraga answered without looking at Shibasaki. He seemed to be the type who didn't know how to deal with a beautiful girl on the warpath.

"Most likely, he'll come with the same bag," Komaki said in a tone of unshakable confidence. "He's obsessed with concealing his actions. Meaning he's probably well practiced in looking natural while using that bag. I think he's confident that he can use it again without getting caught, once the heat is off."

Komaki's tone told them he had calmly thought the whole situation through. It was clear to everyone that the perpetrator's time as a free man was running out.

*

They sent the following description of the culprit to all the local libraries and bookstores:

- *Thick glasses*
- *A large shoulder bag, such as a businessman would carry*
- *Casual clothing, not a suit*

Responses from staff members who remembered seeing him started trickling in immediately. However, no one reported catching him squarely in the act. Instead, there were many bookstore staff members who remembered him as a customer who periodically bought a large quantity of merchandise, mostly magazines. Though since his purchases consisted largely of adult materials, female shopkeepers--out of innocence or malice--regarded him as "creepy."

But the fact that no one had noticed any voyeuristic activity meant that the man had continued to use and enjoy success with his methods for a long time now.

Then, three weeks after Marié's ordeal, they got a hit from Musashino Second Library in Kichijouji. It was the next biggest library in the Musashino metropolitan area, after the Musashino First Library.

A man matching his description had been visiting the library for several days. He didn't borrow any books; he just looked around the library for a while, then left. When they dispatched the librarian who had seen him with Marié to check him out, she reported that the resemblance was strong.

After nearly a week had passed without the man causing any trouble, judgement came down from Genda.

"Let's bust him!"

They had surmised that he had spent the week probing the library to see if information on him had been sent around--as well as trolling for victims that appealed to him.

Once the man was confident that he had gotten away the last time without anyone getting a good look at him, he would probably make a pretty obvious move. The frequency of his short visits to Kichijouji was proof of that.

They had put up posters at the local libraries, but they didn't include a description of the man. All they said was, "Upskirt photography and other lewd behaviors are on the rise within the library. Patrons, please take note." It was a safe message that gave the impression that the library had negligently failed to secure any information on the man they had let get away.

Iku and Shibasaki were to wander the library as bait, posing as a pair of friends (of course, they were friends in real life too). It was the day before their operation.

As Iku completed her daily report, dispirited and heaving a number of sighs, Komaki called out to her.

"Kasahara-san, I have a favor to ask."

"Yes?"

When Iku turned her head, Komaki set a small device down on her desk with a *click*.

"While you're walking around the library during the operation, could you wear this? You don't have to activate it, just put it on."

"Um, sure, I don't mind...but if something happens, it might break."

"It's okay, this one is broken already. To tell you the truth, I think Shibasaki-san's a more likely target--you look like you can be trusted to beat him up if he tries anything."

"Yeah, you're right. If she doesn't open her mouth, she looks like just a pretty face."

"It would be nice to be 'just a pretty face,' as Shibasaki-san amply demonstrates," Komaki laughed, but his heart was probably not as light as his tone. The device he had entrusted her with proved that. Iku gripped the already-broken gadget tightly in her fist.

Komaki was trying to test a theory. When she thought about what it was, Iku, who had finished her preparations and was soon to be bait, realized that it was no time to be sighing.

*

"I tried to make us look like a couple of spoiled college princesses--what do you think?"

Shibasaki's hair was in soft curls, and she wore a bolero over a tidy dress printed with small flowers. The obvious fact that she looked beautiful is not even worth mentioning. However, Iku's appearance surprised the entire squad--including her.

She wore a sheer cardigan layered over a camisole, and a tight miniskirt over patterned white pantyhose. The skirt was a particularly girly one, with lace on the hem. Her height, far from detracting, made her look as striking as a model.

"If it were summer we could have gone with bare legs--pity."

"It is *not* a pity!" Iku reflexively tried to hide her legs by crouching down.

"If you're not careful when you crouch, everyone will get a peek at your underwear. And when you sit, tilt your knees down a little--that's a hard-and-fast rule. Remember it!" she ordered mercilessly. Iku shrieked and found she had no choice but to stand. All she could do was try to cover her legs with her school binder.

"You're not going to be hiding your legs during the actual operation," Shibasaki barked out, strict as a drill sergeant.

"I barely recognized you, you look so--" Tedzuka started, then clapped a hand over his mouth. Apparently he didn't want to admit even to himself that he had been about to say "gorgeous."

"You always wear pants, but I decided I'd make a weapon out of those legs, and what a weapon they turned out to be, seriously! There aren't many amateurs who can wear white tights without making their legs look massive. And that lovely toned muscle from all that training--those tempting lines!"

"Shut up! I don't need that kind of weapon! All I need from my legs the ability to run really fast! And the only thing I really have to do for this job is to flip the bastard onto his back!"

"Just like you flipped me the other day?" Doujou asked with a sour face. The question wound Iku up even tighter.

"Didn't you tell me not to worry about that!? Anyway, *you* were the one trying to steal my private mail!" Iku shot back vehemently.

Shibasaki tugged her sleeve gently. "He's flustered because you look so different from normal," she murmured. "Try to pay attention to these things."

Iku gave Doujou a suspicious glance. But he didn't even look at her.

"You both look lovely. I'm sorry that it's for such an unfortunate reason," Komaki said smoothly, a platitude that set their teeth on edge. In the end, he was the only one who complimented them at all.

"The plan for today is for Doujou, Tedzuka, and a few men from other squads to augment the Kichijouji library's staff. I'll be posing as a patron."

"I suppose there's no need for me to make a personal appearance?" Genda confirmed. He would hold down the fort with the rest of the Task Force. The men left for Kichijouji, and Iku and Shibasaki prepared to follow them.

They waited a short distance from the library on standby until the perpetrator appeared. Finally, Iku's cell phone rang. It was Doujou.

"He's here. Wait a bit, then come."

Normally he would have simply hung up after delivering this curt order, but today his call was a little longer than usual.

"Don't try to blend in with other patrons when you're coming in the door. Time it so it's just you and Shibasaki. After such a thorough transformation, you should try to stand out as much as possible!"

"What are our orders?" Shibasaki asked. Iku repeated them as well as she could remember, and Shibasaki laughed evilly. "See? I knew you bowled him over," she teased.

Iku could no longer keep her face from going red. "...He didn't say which of us he meant," she finally countered.

"You were the one on the phone with him," Shibasaki shot back. "Besides, you could hardly describe this as a 'transformation' for me--I was already beautiful to begin with."

"Okay, we're *working* now, don't tease me anymore. It's hard enough for me to act as bait without any experience."

"I suppose you're right," Shibasaki smiled, and thumped Iku on the back. "There's a break in the stream of patrons. Let's go."

Chattering about last night's television shows to quell her nerves, Iku braced her mind and body and entered the library with Shibasaki.

--He saw them.

The moment she walked through they door, she knew it.

He had sat down at one of the chairs as soon as he came in. Before the women had entered, his gaze had roamed the library as though he were looking for something.

"I'll meet you in an hour at the entrance, okay?" Shibasaki told Iku, loud enough for the man to hear, gesturing as well. Iku only nodded. They parted ways at the door and went to opposite ends of the room, both looking for unpopulated areas, as they had been ordered. She would keep her guards down until something happened. Their quarry would be wary of targeting observant-looking women.

Iku could not have performed this role if she hadn't trusted her squadmates to have her back.

Iku was even more worried about Shibasaki than she was about herself. However, Shibasaki had laughed like a wicked witch. "In cases of groping, to use something you 'just happened' to be holding to stab at the man's hand, or to strike his arm, is justifiable self-defense," she had said, taking a thin, pointy mechanical pencil out of her bag and twirling it. "I'll go all out, even if it means getting charged with *unjustifiable* self-defense."

She would. If push came to shove, she really, really would. The thought eased Iku's worries quite a bit.

On the subject of upskirt photography, Shibasaki had this to say: "It's no skin off my nose if I have my panties illegally filmed by some pathetic creep. He won't be touching me, and the video will be immediately confiscated anyway." In this area too she was much braver than Iku. Was it because she was braver to begin with, or was she used to perverts, with her face and body? She had been targeted much more often in the past than Iku had.

Would the man make his move today, or would he concentrate on seeing which way the wind blew?

Iku's "transformational" clothing had been lent to her by her dormmates, but with Iku's height there weren't many girls whose clothes fit her. If they had to come back more than once she would quickly run out of clothes to borrow.

Not being able to turn around and check on the man was incredibly stressful. Had he stood up? If he had, was he pursuing one of them?

No good, if I think about it I'll tense up. Iku had an idea. She headed for the less-than-popular shelf of books on the library classification system. It would be better to be reading something, and since she was here, she might as well do a little studying at the same

time. She wasn't a natural actress like Shibasaki, and it was a suitable place to await the perpetrator, being unpopular with the general public.

She waited, absorbed in her (pitifully) introductory book on classification for who knows how long.

Suddenly a shadow fell next to her, too close for comfort. She also smelled a sour, oily body odor, though it was not even summer. She stopped herself at the last minute from turning to look, and instead looked down at her feet--where she saw a certain shoulder bag, almost-but-not-quite touching her leg.

Hooked him! Now I just have to decide when to reel him in. She was pondering this when a repulsive caress brushed her buttock.

At that, she gave up all pretense of obliviousness. She used the book she had been reading to beat his hand away and glowered at him fiercely. But the man seemed not at all put off--in fact, he smiled faintly, and put both hands under her skirt and began to fondle her.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing, you pervert!! I'm gonna rearrange your face!" she bellowed.

The man jerked in surprise. She grabbed the frozen man's arm--*Uuugh, I really don't want to touch him*, she thought sincerely--pulled, and was about to throw him over her leg--

Shit, I'm wearing a skirt! The bag with upskirt photography equipment was still at her feet, and she was less than reassured by the fact that "the video will be immediately confiscated anyway." In any case, her unaccustomedly fashionable shoes caused her foot to twist, and she collapsed in a heap.

"What the hell are you doing!?" a familiar voice shouted angrily.

"I'm sorry, sir!" she apologized before she realized that the words were not meant for her. Suddenly she felt a weight lift from her back--the man, who had fallen on top of her, had been pulled off.

Doujou hauled him up, only to deliver a magnificent sweeping hip throw and send him crashing to the ground again--where he was handcuffed by the waiting Tedzuka.

"Are you alright?" Iku didn't realize Doujou was talking to her even though he rushed over to her side, but indeed it was she he was worried about. "You twisted it funny just now; it's not sprained, is it?" Without asking permission, he pulled off her shoe and moved her foot around in circles, testing her ankle.

"Umm, in the middle of throwing him, I remembered I was wearing a skirt. Also, I couldn't raise my legs as high because it's so tight, and I lost my balance..."

"Idiot! How could you not remember something like that?" Doujou shouted tactlessly. Her foot seemed to be fine, so he released it--or more accurately, he dropped it self-consciously. "Honestly! When I saw you suddenly taking that stance in spite of the way you were dressed, I wondered just what kind of fan service you were going to give him!"

"I-I wasn't going to--! I mean, if an enemy is right in front of you, you go after him, right?!"

"Look, I know it's your signature move, but be aware that in that outfit a leg-sweeping throw is fan service aplenty," Tedzuka put in, a hundred times more dispassionate than Doujou.

Doujou hesitated for a long moment, chewing the question over, then asked, "Did he do anything to you?"

"He touched my leg. And then he put his hands up my skirt." Doujou's expression went murderous, and she felt rather than saw his hands ball into fists. She hastened to add, "That's all. It was--it was no big--"

"Don't you *dare* say it was no big deal!" he bellowed angrily. Iku gulped. In the exact opposite tone, he said, "Well done," and rose to his feet as if to get away from her.

"S-Sting operations are against the law!" the man cried in a shrill voice.

"Why yes they are! If you're talking about the police," Shibasaki countered, seeming to enjoy the chance to mock him. "But in the Library Force, anything goes. What a pity for you--you pervert."

Having a woman as beautiful as Shibasaki call him a pervert to his face, all while wearing a dazzling smile, looked to be more than he could stomach. He seemed to be the kind of pervert who had a strange kind of vanity.

Handcuffed, the man hung his head, crestfallen.

"I just have one question, and you're going to answer it." She did not give him the option of refusing. The man looked completely overwhelmed. "Why did you pick that one, instead of me? I was *really* disappointed."

The man looked down at his lap, afraid. At that, his interrogator changed--from Shibasaki to Komaki.

"It was because of this, wasn't it." It was a statement, not a question. Komaki held up the small device that he had asked Iku to wear. Worn on the ear, it was a hearing aid that Marié had used long

ago before it broke. With Iku's short hair, it had been highly visible from behind.

"I purposely asked her to wear this today. You knew all about that girl, didn't you? You knew that she wore a hearing aid; that she was hard of hearing; that she didn't speak much?"

The man appeared to realize that "that girl" was not Iku--the one at the root of the current commotion--but another young woman.

"You thought she was the same as that girl, right? A passive weakling who wouldn't speak up for herself? You thought that you could get away with doing the same thing to her as you did before, right? And you did even more despicable things to that girl, who couldn't defend herself, didn't you?"

He only referred to the women with pronouns--"that girl" and "her"--but that distinction was enough for Komaki and the man to communicate without confusion.

The man turned pale, and began to shake.

It was clear that Komaki was furious, but his tone was too-perfectly flat and controlled. It was truly uncanny.

"What did you think when you found that girl? That you could make her an outlet for your own lust? You thought you could do whatever you wanted to a girl who couldn't call for help, right?"

Komaki maintained a consistently interrogative tone throughout, yet he never gave the man a chance to answer "No" to any of his questions.

"The world would be a better place if you were dead."

At the end of this long, long interrogation which sought no reply came this final condemnation. The man slumped, his head hanging low. He hadn't even been able to avert his eyes until then.

Just then, Shibasaki, who had been fishing for the man's ID, raised her voice triumphantly.

"Hooray, he's 26! There'll be absolutely no problem with reporting his real name. Lately both the media and the police have gotten especially tough on sexual assault, so when society crucifies him, it'll be under his own dirty face and the name his parents so lovingly bestowed upon him."

Shibasaki chuckled. The man looked daggers at her, perhaps in a desperate show of bravado. Shibasaki's smile froze instantly.

"I really am genuinely disappointed you didn't choose me. As you can see, I'm a very beautiful woman. I have highly-developed reflexes when it comes to using justifiable self-defense against perverts."

As she spoke, Shibasaki reached into her bag and pulled out--her pointy mechanical pencil.

"I'll leave it to you to imagine just how I could use this ordinary writing instrument as a weapon, and just how much damage I could do--but it's my custom to never hesitate against your type. If you underestimate a woman too much, you might end up with a big hole in your arm. That's what I intended to do to you, if you had come after me, anyway. Lucky for you that you chose an idiot who would try to do a leg-sweeping throw while wearing a skirt." Shibasaki gave the man a toothy smile. It seemed to finally suck all remaining life out of him.

*

"Marié, Marié!"

Marié's mother woke her up earlier than usual to show her the national paper that had been delivered to their house.

Among the so-called page-three news¹, taking up quite a bit of space, was an article about the pervert who had committed the crime against Marié.

The article included his name and age, and in addition to describing his methods, it reported that there was a rigorous investigation underway into any past crimes he might have committed. It touched on the fact that upskirt photography and other acts of harassment were on the rise in bookstores and local libraries, and ended by urging women to be careful.

"Our next-door neighbor says there was an even longer article in the local paper."

The housewife information network was a fearsome thing, even early in the morning.

"I promise you, I will make that library a place you can feel safe visiting again."

Komaki had kept his promise.

"Your boyfriend is quite dependable, isn't he?" her mother said.

Marié nodded instinctively--then snapped her head up. But her mother was already leaving her room.

I wonder what she meant...does Mom know? Does Dad?

¹ My Japanese dictionary gives "page-three news" as "human-interest article," "police news," or "local news."

Her thoughts circled her head in a frenzy. For the first time, she understood why, when she had sulkily offered to tell her parents about them, Komaki had looked strained and told her, "Stop it, you're making me twitchy."

It *did* make her feel twitchy. She was stuck worrying about what expression she should wear when she descended downstairs again. Perhaps it was her punishment for whining at Komaki.

On her way home from school, she texted Komaki a heads-up. She didn't usually do so--in fact, it was the first time she had.

"I'll be coming to the library today on the way home"

Komaki's reply to this short message was equally brief.

"Please come, and don't be afraid"

Komaki met her in the hall outside the reference room. He must have estimated her arrival time and come to wait for her.

It was noisy out in the hall, so she spoke. "I came after I saw today's newspaper."

"I understand. I'm sorry it took so long."

With the surrounding noise, about all Marié heard was "...stand. sor...ook...long," but by carefully reading his lips she was able to fill in the blanks. She could do that with Komaki's words.

So she shook her head. *No, thank you.*

"Here." Komaki reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver chain, looping it around Marié's neck. At the end of the chain was a slender flute-like object. "I tried to look for one that wouldn't look too strange to wear day-to-day. It might be a little conspicuous."

Perhaps because it used words she was unused to hearing, the rest he communicated by text message.

"Emergency Whistle" was the title; the body continued:

"Before Kasahara-san and Shibasaki-san told me, I didn't know this, but apparently many women have trouble raising their voices in times like that. Since you have trouble raising your voice at the best of times, it was twice as hard as you to call for help. I feel like a fool for not realizing that before now; I'm sorry.

"So from now on, if you ever get in trouble, use this in place of your voice. In the middle of the library, anywhere, it doesn't matter. Blow it with all your might, so that I'll hear it. If I do, I promise I'll come running. If I can't, I know someone will hear it and notice that you're in trouble."

...Occasionally, she was jealous of her friends who were dating boys from their class. They could hang out together openly any time they wanted. They wore rings on the fourth fingers of their left hands--presents from their boyfriends that were against school rules.

Komaki hadn't made her any promises like that. But the whistle that he had searched all over for and carefully selected, which now hung around Marié's neck, was proof that he treasured her, that he wanted to keep her safe.

"I'll never take it off. I'll always wear it."

Even at school. If she told her teachers that it was for her safety because she couldn't raise her voice in emergencies, she thought they would allow it.

"Shall we go find you a book?"

She nodded at Komaki's invitation and followed him. They couldn't publicly hold hands or link arms; they couldn't openly stick close together or flirt or joke.

But Komaki had held her tight once when she was most hurt, and gave her a "voice" to use when she was in trouble. It was plenty for her.

*

I need to just start all over and go from there.

After the case had been resolved, the only thing left unsettled was the matter between Iku and Doujou. Or rather, *Iku* felt that there was still something to settle between them.

After all, he had never let her apologize for the incident in their office where he had ended up with a concussion.

She found her chance when it was time for her to leave work and Doujou was still working overtime. Komaki was there too, but since he knew the whole story and had given her advice, she decided (on her own) that it was fine. She waited for Tedzuka and the other Task Force members to withdraw, then addressed Doujou. "Instructor Doujou."

"Hm? What?"

She had a feeling she would turn red if their eyes met, so just as he raised his head, she bowed hers deeply.

"I'm sorry for what I did the other day!"

Doujou pulled back in surprise at her sudden extravagant apology. "What are you talking about all of a sudden!? Which 'other day' are you talking about?"

The question stung. *He's confused about what day I mean? Do I do something that requires an apology every single day?* But she explained, "Before, when I gave you a concussion in the office..."

She was too uncomfortable to bring up the reason she had given him a concussion, but Doujou looked just as uncomfortable that the subject had been raised at all.

Doujou looked away from her with a surly expression. In a tone to match--some might call it sulky--he spat, "You don't need to apologize for that!"

Komaki, giggling at the desk opposite his, glanced over at Doujou mirthfully. "Looks like she finally caught you, Doujou."

From the way he said it, Iku understood that Doujou had been avoiding her attempts to apologize. Indeed, the first time she had gone to apologize, he had deftly stolen the initiative from her and said, "Nah, don't worry about what happened." And apparently it hadn't been her imagination that every time she tried to apologize after that, he would change the subject or escape.

"Because you didn't want to resolve things properly, she had to chase you down. Now, don't you have something to say to her too?"

"*I was wrong!*" Doujou's tone could now *only* be called sulky. "I crossed the line from professional business into personal affairs. It doesn't matter what Tedzuka Satoshi wrote to you--if it's a personal letter and you don't want to show it to me or ask my advice about it, then I have no right to force you just because I'm your superior officer."

She was crushed by his dismissive phrasing. "If it was something I needed to ask advice about, then I would take it to you first!" *Wait, if I'm so dispirited, why am I lashing out at him!?* she chided herself, but that was just her nature. "But it's a private thing! To other people it might be nothing, but to me it's really embarrassing and I don't want anyone else to find out about it! And he dashed it off so casually in this snickering little postscript--I don't want to show it to anyone, would you!?"

To show that note where her love was mocked in hastily-penned strokes--and to the man himself!--would be too much to bear.

She sniffled, fighting back tears, then heard the creak of a cheap office chair as Doujou stood.

"I'm sorry." He patted her head gently as he apologized.

"It was childish taunting. Really, honestly, that's all it was."

"It hurt you. You don't need to tell me what it is, but you don't have to pretend that it was no big deal."

--I wish I didn't know he was my prince.

She wished she had naturally graduated from admiring her prince to loving this man.

His efforts at comforting her were calming her down--and just as Komaki had said, she couldn't say whether that was because he had once been her prince, or because he was the Doujou she knew now.

When she had been jealous of the way Doujou always saved the day, and wanted to follow in his footsteps and get him to recognize her abilities, that might have been because a part of her was falling in love with him.

When Satoshi had forced her to realize that he and her prince were the same person, he had thrown Iku's love into chaos. Until she had sorted out this confusion, she couldn't move one step forward or back. She once again pitied Tedzuka, knowing that his brother was the kind of person who could toy with another person's romance like that. She prayed that he at least didn't do it to his own family.

"If you're done now, go home." From his tone, Iku deduced after a moment that the words were meant kindly.

She raised her head swiftly. "I'm graduating from my prince!"

Komaki roared with laughter. It was a reaction unlike any she had witnessed before.

"W-What is so *funny* that you're laughing the greatest laugh of your life over it!?"

"I'm s--I'm sorr--I know you're completely serious, Kasahara-san, I do, but when spoken that sentence has huge destructive power."

Doujou was frozen in place. But Komaki was reacting enough for both of them--though probably not on purpose. Even as he tried to contain himself, he was still wracked with giggles every few seconds.

"No, I can't handle it! I can't hear that and keep a straight face! And

even if we searched all over Japan, we'd never find someone else who could say that with a straight face!"

"Leave me alooooooone!! You have no right to laugh at me like this, even if you are my superior officer!" *And weren't you the one who told me to look at Doujou as he is now!?*--but she couldn't say that.

"I know! I'm sorry, a ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Then don't burst out laughing in the middle of apologizing, you mask of comedy²!"

It was the first time she had snarled at Komaki. But this one episode had been enough to teach her that he was the type who would belabor a joke as long as possible.

"Ahhh, ow, my side hurts..." Komaki said, finally quieting down. Meaning he had laughed at her so hard that he had a stitch in his side. Too drained to snap at him any more, she sank into a huddle on the ground. "I'm really sorry, Kasahara-san," he said, finally managing a straight-faced apology. "Anyway, there was more to your princely valedictorian speech, I'm sure. And Doujou's still frozen over there, so please thaw him out before you go home."

Doujou finally jerked at the mention of his name. "What--What does it have to do with me?"

"She was delivering the speech to you in the first place. Why don't you help her up?"

Following Komaki's instructions, Doujou timidly extended a hand to Iku, who was still in a ball on the floor. "I can stand by myself," she said stubbornly, ignoring that timid hand.

"I'm going to stop gushing about my prince, and I'm going to stop trying to find out who he is." Doujou twitched at that last item. "The Library Officer I met six years ago lives six years in the past; if I met him today, he wouldn't be the same person. After six years of toil and effort, that Library Officer Third Class--or maybe Second Class--anyway, he's become whoever he is today. I still admire him and I still love him, but--"

She had spoken animatedly until that point, but got stuck there. She thought and thought, and finally continued, "But it's not the Library Officer from six years ago--it's the Library Officer who is this moment working hard somewhere in the Library Force, if he hasn't quit, that I want to love. Not because he was my prince six years ago. For that reason, I want to work hard to become the kind of person who

² Literally *warai kamen*, "laughing mask." Most of the hits on Google for the phrase turn up a rather obscure 1960s manga, so it's possible that that's what Iku is actually referring to.

wouldn't feel ashamed to stand before him. That's why I'm--" *graduating from my prince*, she almost said, but cut herself off--if she used that phrase, she would send Komaki into fits again.

"...There's no reason you had to specially come and announce the fact to me," Doujou said, looking a little overwhelmed.

"You were the one who always looked the most irritated when I talked about my prince, Instructor," she said evasively, hoping she would be forgiven for this half-truth. "I thought it might reassure you. Excuse me," she bowed low, then turned around and left. From the crashing sound Doujou's chair made as it slammed into the chair behind when he yanked it out, she could tell that he was agitated.

"Ha ha, 'I'm graduating from my prince'! That was priceless."

Across from him, Komaki was still snickering every once in a while. Doujou ignored it all with a sour expression.

"Do you feel a bit vindicated now?"

Doujou refused to answer this leading question, but it did start a train of thought.

"But, if you had been the one in the bookstore with me that day, I wouldn't have wanted to join the Library Force!"

When she had attacked him with those words, he had been at a loss for a response. If he had been the person he was today, Iku wouldn't have joined the Library Force. He had believed for so long that that was right, that it would have been for the best--but when that belief was put into words and used as a weapon against him, a part of him had been hurt by it.

The words had been a flat-out rejection of the growth and improvement he'd thought he'd made in the intervening five--now six--years. And the fact that Iku had been the one rejecting him had been unexpectedly painful.

He was forced to admit to himself that it stung, to have his whole self rejected by the girl he'd once wanted to rescue so badly.

It was childish, but it had irritated him to feel compared to his former self every time Iku rhapsodized about her "prince." Even though she didn't know his true identity.

Aha. I wanted--

--I wanted the person who stood tall and brave in the face of censorship six years ago to respect and admire the person I am now, he finally realized.

In that case.

"If it was something I needed to ask advice about, then I would take it to you first!"

As he remembered Iku's waspish words, a small smile appeared on his face.

"So, I hear she wants to fall in love with the person her prince is now," Komaki said teasingly.

Doujou was composed enough now that Komaki's words didn't faze him.

"Then I hope she finds him," he said calmly.

Komaki groaned. "What an infuriating pair you are," he muttered.

Chapter 2, The Promotion Exam Approaches

*

Twenty-two months after joining, Library Force members qualified to take a promotion exam.

College graduates started as Librarians First Class when they joined, so they would be trying for a promotion to Chief Librarian; high school graduates would be aiming for Librarian First Class.

The promotion exam, which was held before the library closed for spring cleaning, was the first hurdle on the path for those who wanted to remain in the Library Force. As it approached, it became the main topic of conversation for those who were taking it.

In their room, Shibasaki asked Iku casually, "So you actually qualified for the exam, Kasahara?"

Iku looked daggers at her. "Bite me! Why would you even think for a moment that I wouldn't qualify!?"

"If you can't think of a reason, there's no need to get angry, is there?" Shibasaki said, slipping through her grasp again like an eel. Iku grumpily sipped her mug of tea.

Qualification for the exam was determined by performance evaluation and the recommendation of an applicant's direct supervisor. For Iku and Tedzuka in the Library Task Force, their direct supervisor was Doujou.

She had heard that some of the top brass in the governmental faction had been against her taking the exam, because of the suspicion she had fallen under during the concealed books incident the summer before. But Doujou had firmly dismissed these misgivings.

As Iku thought back on that series of events, her thoughts began to drift in an alarmingly dreamy direction. She shook her head fiercely to clear it. Next to her, Shibasaki looked at her strangely.

--It doesn't mean anything! He would defend a subordinate against injustice from anyone! He's definitely not doing it especially for me! If anything, since I'm the only one stupid enough to fall into these traps, when he has to come to my rescue, it basically means that I'm incompetent!

In her effort to be dispassionate, she had overshot and crossed into "devastatingly negative" instead. Her head drooped, and a loud *thud* resounded through the room as her forehead banged against the rim of her mug.

"Oh no! Are you okay!?"

"Mm, yeah--hurts a bit though."

"I was talking to the mug."

"Excuse me?!"

"There's no point in worrying about a girl who hits her head on the edge of a cup with the full force of gravity and then says it only hurts 'a bit,'" Shibasaki said, callous but correct.

As Iku sat feeling sorry for herself, a little of her envy leaked through. "Must be nice to be you and Tedzuka, and not have to worry about the exam." The promotion exam had a typical pass-fail ratio; almost every Force member qualified to take it, but only a certain percentage of them passed.

"Why would anyone worry? Almost 50 percent of applicants pass, after all."

"The only people who would say something like that are people who never had to equate the pass-fail ratio with their own chances of passing! I got Level Four on the middle school English proficiency test³--do you think I could say that!?"

Shibasaki looked impressed. "I've heard from a lot of people who got Level Three, but...wow, you don't hear Level Four that often."

"That's why I usually rely my legs to get me through tests and exams!" she said, drawing up a knee and slapping the firm muscle of her thigh. The sound split the air.

"When you put it like that, it sounds like your legs grant miracles; have you thought of charging people a hundred yen to touch them before exams? If you were bare-legged in gym shorts, I could guarantee that you made five thousand. What do you think? I'd split the profits with you, 60-40. Alternatively, you could wear provocatively-ripped pantyhose, and we could make a fortune."

"Hold it! That business strategy is dangerously close to snake oil salesmanship, isn't it!"

"Nah, plenty of people have a fetish for your legs already."

"Auuuugggh! I did *not* need to know that!" She rubbed her shoulders, trying soothe away the goosebumps that had arisen there.

Shibasaki, whose tolerance for this sort of thing was much higher, grinned with good cheer. "Well, it's only the first promotion exam. It shouldn't be hard to pass the written portion if you can

³ The second-lowest grade, with Level One being the highest (college-level English skill) and Level Five being the lowest (grade-school level English skill). An average middle school graduate should be at Level Three; many try for Level Two.

memorize the library handbook from cover to cover. The real problem is going to be the practical portion--at least for you."

Shibasaki started to continue, but was silenced by a sharp glare from Iku.

*

Of those from Doujou's squad, Tedzuka was a sure bet--at least that's what everyone was saying. A month before the promotion exam, the odds-on favorite himself asked Shibasaki to meet with him.

He invited her out to lunch, carefully planning it for a day when Iku would still be working her shift.

"This is a surprise. What happened?"

Even after their strangely personal conversation after the ordeal with Tedzuka's brother, they had not quite become friends. They spoke and cooperated with each other if there was a need, but each preferred to keep the relationship at the level of colleagues who rarely interacted on anything other than a professional level.

"...I needed your advice."

Tedzuka's expression was serious as he forced the words out, but Shibasaki had no idea what he wanted advice on. As someone who prided herself on being more discerning than the average person, she was a little put out with herself.

"...Is it about your brother?"

She tried tiptoeing out onto the most dangerous minefield first, but Tedzuka just snorted bitterly. "Not likely. That man tries to disguise his self-interest as family love and wave it in my face, but he can't be bothered to see how much it hurts or rattles me. He won't change no matter how much I think about it, so I've just decided to stop thinking about him at all," Tedzuka finished, half-spitting the words.

...That's quite the chip on his shoulder, thought Shibasaki, drawn in involuntarily. Tedzuka wasn't the type to get riled up about trivial things the way Iku was; given that and his unusually despairing reaction to the question about his brother, the matter he needed advice on must be serious indeed.

"It sounds like something's bothering you a great deal. I know you have other, closer friends, but if you'd rather talk to me about it, I'm willing to listen."

It was a measure of the distance between Shibasaki and Tedzuka that she did not promise to advise him, even now.

"...is," His voice was so low that Shibasaki couldn't hear. When she leaned in closer, Tedzuka suddenly snapped his head up irritably. "Why does *this* year's practical exam have to be reading aloud to children!?"

Shibasaki burst out laughing before she could restrain herself. "A ha ha! So *that's* what this is all about!"

"Shut up!"

Tedzuka's uncharacteristically huffy expression was almost as comical as Iku's--though it would probably sting him to hear that, so she kept this impression to herself.

The subject of the practical portion of the promotion exam changed from year to year. It ranged widely, from counter duty to reshelving, from manning the archives to running a mock mini-event.

The practical exam for Defense Force members was limited to topics like hand-to-hand fighting and marksmanship, but since Library Task Force members were expected to be conversant in every form of library duty, they were treated as Administrative Division members for the purposes of the promotion exam.

And for the librarians, the practical portion of this year's promotion exam was reading a storybook to a group of children.

"Why only this year, of all years...?! It's like they *know* how bad I am with children...! Is someone screwing with me!?"

Indeed, thanks to Tedzuka's inflexible, too-serious attitude, he did not have a way with children, to put it mildly. She had heard that he had once tried to handcuff the middle-schoolers responsible for throwing fireworks into a crowd, merciless even though they had lost the will to resist. This inflexibility came from his habit of trying to evaluate everything dispassionately, without letting emotion cloud his judgement, but it really didn't work when children were involved.

"You say that, but running events devoted to children's cultural education is one of the most important functions of the library. They're in the rotation of subjects for the exam, and one comes up every few years."

The library hosted many such gatherings, from story hour and book club meetings to multimedia events; they also collaborated with local volunteers to plan cultural events and activities. When the weather was good, outdoor games were not uncommon. A librarian's duties could be surprisingly varied.

But--"I know it's important!" Tedzuka said. "But it didn't have to be this year!"

"One of the main principles of the Task Force is the ability to perform any and every kind of library duty, is it not?"

"But as an organization it's blatantly skewed towards combat. Couldn't we have joined up with the Defense Force for the exam this year!?"

When Tedzuka met with an unforeseen situation, he could be surprisingly, adorably foolish. While Shibasaki wondered in absent calculation if she could sell this information to Tedzuka's fangirls, Tedzuka continued to use his superior intellect to rant about how ill-suited this year's exam topic was to the Task Force.

"Well, there's no changing what's already been decided. Just do your best," she told him indifferently, ending the conversation and going back to her lunch.

"Wait." When she lifted her head from her food, Tedzuka's gaze was fixed awkwardly on a corner of the ceiling. "Uh...would you mind teaching me how to handle children? The Administrative Division hosts plenty of children's events, right?"

You could have just come out and asked me straight from the beginning! Men sure do feel the need to justify everything, Shibasaki thought as she burst out laughing. Well, I won't deny that's what makes them cute sometimes.

Laughing merrily, she nodded at Tedzuka. "Fine, how much am I getting for it?"

Tedzuka's eyes popped at her clear, assertive tone. "You--! Wasn't selling my watch at a bargain price for drinking money enough for you!?"

"What? But that was like closure for both of us. Anyway, when you gave it to me and told me to get rid of it, it was no longer your watch, now was it?"

Tedzuka cried out in despair. "*Fine!* Just tell me what you want!"

Lunch including dessert was Iku's price, but this was Tedzuka, who so rarely showed any weakness. It was also getting to be time to exchange information with him again.

"One dinner, including drinks. Contingent upon your passing, if you like."

"That goes without saying, idiot! If I fail--" Tedzuka appeared to be imagining the spectacle of Iku passing and himself failing. Moaning, he dropped his head into his hands.

*

"Well, well, that was an unexpected development." Shibasaki smirked during a break in her duties.

If it were just the written examination, Tedzuka would have no problems passing by himself. Iku would be lucky if she cleared the bar, toes clipping it on the way.

But the practical exam meant Tedzuka was in just as much trouble as she was. Usually, one would go to a superior officer for help on an exam, but he had avoided that route and gone to Shibasaki. Without a doubt, he did not want his weakness known within the squad.

For now, she had advised him to watch Iku when they had duties in the library, but she didn't know what would come of that. Suddenly remembering that they had the same shift today, Shibasaki snickered.

"Kasahara-san!"

Running over to them near the reference room were Kimura Yuuma and Yoshikawa Taiga. They were middle schoolers who had become familiar faces after a forum on library restrictions that had taken place last year.

At the time, it had been predicted that Yuuma would make student council president in ninth grade⁴, and indeed he had. In fact, he had just given up the position a few days ago; come April, the two would be in high school.

"Shush! Geez, this is a library! Keep it down!" Her reprimand was delivered in her normal loud voice, so it wasn't actually much of a reprimand. Yuuma made a pacifying gesture toward her.

The two greeted Tedzuka perfunctorily, but then turned back to Iku and started talking. "The books that were forbidden to us because of the Committee for Reflection's interference have been liberated!"

"*Kana of the Wastes!* The whole series!" Taiga appended enthusiastically.

Ah, that's the one I put in handcuffs, Tedzuka remembered, though it wasn't a pleasant memory. It had happened when these two had thrown fireworks into a gathering of the Committee for Sound Child-Rearing, a group that had advocated for restrictions on school libraries.

⁴ Remember, in Japan middle school extends from seventh to ninth grade, and high school from tenth to twelfth.

Looking back on it now, his reaction had been inflexible and excessive.

I wonder if he still bears a grudge? Tedzuka thought, heart sinking a bit.

"Really? That's great! Good job!" Iku cried, jumping up and down and gushing with the boys and generally ignoring her own reprimand. Tedzuka could not possibly insert himself into that circle--his eyes crossed from the absurdity of just trying to picture it.

The three had calmed down, but to slip in a "congratulations" now would sound forced, so he maintained his silence.

Then Yuuma turned to him. "Tedsuka-san, did you not know about my campaign promise?"

"No..." Tedzuka realized that his answer was ambiguous, and hastily added, "I knew about it."

When Yuuma had been running for student council president, he had promised to restore the books that had been seized by the PTA's Committee for Reflection on Sound Child-Rearing. It had been a long battle; victory had only come at the end of his term of office.

"Thank you for remembering!"

"Ah...no problem. You're the one who deserves thanks. Congratulations."

After that awkward congratulations, he realized: *Did a middle-schooler just take pity on me and try to include me in the conversation!?* His shoulders slumped another inch.

They finished talking, and the boys left the library. Iku and Tedzuka resumed their patrol--until.

"Sorry. Just a minute."

Leaving Iku behind before she had a chance to protest, Tedzuka exited the building and chased after the boys.

"Yoshikawa!"

Tedsuka didn't know if he should be calling him "Yoshikawa-kun," and he wasn't close enough to him to call him "Taiga" like Iku, so he shouted his family name. But Yoshikawa Taiga flinched and hunched his shoulders as he turned around, wearing a clearly terrified expression. *Ahh, I'm the kind of man who frightens little middle-school kids,* he thought, growing even more despondent.

"What? What? I didn't do it!"

"Don't worry, I'm not angry and I'm not here to yell at you. I just wanted to ask you something." Looking straight at Taiga, who was

subtly keeping his distance from him, Tedzuka asked brazenly, "Did you find it unpleasant when I handcuffed you?"

Taiga stared at him blankly. He probably hadn't been expecting Tedzuka to bring up such an old incident. "Unpleasant?...uh, yeah, I hated it, but...everyone would feel that way..."

Tedzuka was about to say, "I'm sorry," when Taiga continued, unusually vocal.

"What, you're gonna start preachin' at me again after all this time!? I thought about what I did! I learned my lesson! Can't you just forgive and forget already!"

"Look, that's not why I asked!" Tedzuka shouted over Taiga. *Hell, that probably sounded threatening too!* More discouraged than ever, he added, "I thought about it later, and I wondered if my inflexible application of the rules might have caused undue harm to a young person."

"What? I don't even get what you just said, Tedzuka-san!" Taiga said uncooperatively.

Yuuma elbowed him. "Answer the man, Taiga. Even grown-ups lose their way sometimes."

Ouch! Yuuma's attempt at assistance stung, but it didn't give Tedzuka the right to complain.

Taiga, looking skeptical, opened his mouth. "I was way, way scared, but I don't have any hard feelings about it or anything. I'm glad that Kasahara-san told you to take them off, but, I dunno, it made me realize that I had done something bad enough for a grown-up to put me in handcuffs for, I guess...me and Yuuma just wanted to teach the Committee for Reflection a lesson, but you made me see that we went too far. I seriously thought you were gonna call the police on us." It was here that Taiga, for whom speaking was not a strong point, reach the end of his limited supply of eloquence. "I learned my lesson! I learned it hard! That's why I get all scared around you! 'Cause the handcuffs were the scariest part! But I don't hate you. If you hadn't taught us a lesson then, we mighta done something even worse! Okay, happy now!?"

Tedzuka nodded, cowed.

Yuuma put in a word. "The reason we are so attached to Kasahara-san is because she can naturally interact with us on our level. Other people congratulate us--but don't get excited on the same level as we do, am I right?"

Apparently Yuuma had guessed what he was worried about, and was trying to soothe his fears that the two children he knew best hated him, that he was unlovable by children in general.

His face grew hot with shame at being clearly outclassed by a middle-schooler. His cheeks were probably turning red too.

"Good luck on the practical portion of the promotion exam!"

This was the last straw. Only through sheer willpower did Tedzuka manage to resist the urge to drop his head into his hands.

Iku was waiting for him inside the library. "What was that all about? You don't usually have anything to say to those two."

"Shut up," he said in a reflexive burst of anger. "I just went to confirm that you're every bit as much of a kid as they are!"

"Who do you think you are, insulting me out of nowhere!? If you're trying to pick a fight, you got one!"

"I don't have time to pick fights with you!"

It turned out that Iku got along so well with children because of a peculiarity of her personality, which was of no use to Tedzuka at all.

"Watch Iku while she's on duty in the library," indeed.

"It didn't help at all!" Tedzuka complained strenuously to Shibasaki, whom he had snagged in the reference room. "Could you see *me* squealing and jumping for joy if the middle-school duo gave me good news?"

"Oooh, I would pay 200,000 yen to see that spectacle in person-- if you'd let me take digital pictures."

"Why are you giving me an exact number!? And just how big a return on investment are you expecting?" Tedzuka asked bitterly.

Shibasaki looked at him quizzically. "If you'll remember, I never said that Kasahara would be a good role model for you to imitate. I just said to observe her as an example of one way to connect with children. If you're done with that, there are other examples in your squad to observe. Aren't you good at collating data and putting it to use? You have the personality for it, anyway."

"It's not that simple..."

It wasn't often that the Library Task Force had the opportunity to be involved with children's events. It would be difficult to gather enough data in the limited amount of time before the promotion exam.

If Tedzuka was honest with himself, he had ignored his chances to gather data up until now. The squad had been recruited to help out

with children's book clubs and events a few times before, but Tedzuka, not knowing how to deal with children, had always chosen to work behind-the-scenes, and so had had almost no contact with them.

If only he hadn't squandered his limited opportunities and taken a more active role--too late now. Komaki was probably very good with children, and he should have watched to see how Doujou handled them. A regrettable mistake. Tedzuka remembered Iku reprimanding rowdy children, losing her temper with them, or just plain screaming at them (the children had been wild with terror after a trip through the haunted house, and no amount of anger on Iku's part could curb their excitement), but that memory could be of no use to him.

"...I don't want to do a mediocre job at it."

The complaint slipped out before he was even aware he had spoken.

At this moment he realized just how much he had been faking his own competence by avoiding the tasks he wasn't good at. For a job like this--even his despicable brother could outdo him. Indeed, he could easily picture his brother reading a storybook to little children and doing a flawless job.

"A pile of people are going to fail, so I wouldn't say something like that too loudly, if I were you."

"Is that supposed to cheer me up?"

"A little touchy, are we?" Shibasaki smiled wryly and patted Tedzuka on the head. She was short enough that she need to stretch to reach him, he noticed for the first time. "This Sunday, there's going to be a story hour at one of the branches nearby. I'm going to be participating--want to come help out?"

It was easy to see that she was trying to be sympathetic--which hurt his pride--but it just proved how obvious it was to other people that he had lost his confidence. Especially if the other person was Shibasaki.

"...isn't that more shifts than you usually work?" Tedzuka asked, faintly puzzled.

Shibasaki smiled sardonically. "It was a sudden thing, so they couldn't get their staff's shifts to line up. So I'm coming in on my day off. We don't have enough men signed up yet, so it would be a big help if you could come. How about a little give-and-take?" she grinned.

Tedzuka had one last anxious thought. "Are you going to ask Kasahara too?"

"She doesn't need the practice. She already connects with kids on their level."

It was just as Yuuma had said earlier.

"As for me, it's important to get people who don't often show weakness to owe me favors."

At Shibasaki's tone, which was so saccharine-sweet that it practically decorated the end of the sentence with a heart, he finally gave in and burst out laughing.

*

Tedzuka had abandoned her after their shift, saying he had business in the reference room, so Iku timidly entered the Task Force office alone. In their squad's section, she saw that Doujou was the only one who had returned so far. His back was straight as he briskly organized papers, perhaps composing his daily report.

That back was--*What the hell is wrong with you, swooning over someone's back!?*

After the unexpected revelation that Doujou had been the one who had saved Iku from the censors when she was in high school, it had taken a long time before she could relax around him again. She still couldn't say she was totally relaxed when they were alone together.

The only one who knew the truth was Komaki--she had found herself confessing to him--but she didn't see Komaki in the room. *Maybe I should wait until Tedzuka gets back,* came the selfish thought, when Doujou turned around and saw her.

Their eyes met--

"N-Now that I'm back, I think I'll make some coffee..." she said loudly to herself, her acting skills on about the level of the Himawari Theatre Group⁵. *That sounded so fake!* she wailed to herself as she walked to the sink. *He's gonna be suspicious for sure!* But it was the best that Iku could do.

To speak unselfconsciously to the prince she had admired for six and a half years was too much to ask from Iku in the first place.

"Ah, while you're at it, make some for me too."

⁵ A famous children's theatre group in Japan.

Before, she might have delighted in telling him, *"The rule is that everyone makes their own coffee, sir!"* Today, she nodded docilely. "Yes, sir."

"...why have you been so cooperative lately? It's creeping me out."

Perhaps her behavior was making Doujou suspicious, but lately he had taken to making remarks like that to try and provoke a reaction from her. She simply didn't have the spare wit to respond.

"Are you feeling ill?"

"No--? I'm fine."

Don't look at meeeee! she wailed to herself. Her hands felt stiff and clumsy as they prepared the coffee.

"Here you go," she said, passing a cup to Doujou. As he took it, he peered into her face.

"Are you sure you're all right? Err...how are you dormmates treating you?"

The hard time she had had with her dormmates after she had been falsely accused of hiding books still weighed too heavily on Doujou's mind. Part of it was probably the frustration that there were places in the women's dorm that his authority couldn't reach.

...Augh! Stop heaving, little A-cup bosom--! she scolded herself fiercely. *Heaving bosoms might be a staple of shoujo manga, but you've got a lot of nerve trying to do it as a 170 cm combat professional!*

Look, Instructor Doujou's personality and philosophy make it impossible for him not to worry about a colleague in trouble! He's not doing anything special for you! Nothing at all, you hear me?

As she stirred her cup, muttering to herself, Doujou took one sip of his coffee and spat it out with all his might.

"What the *hell* is this! How much sugar did you put in here!?"

"What!?" Iku hastily sipped her own coffee; it tasted almost like a latte. Her bad case of nerves had caused her to add at least five spoonfuls of sugar.

"I-I'm sorry, I was distracted! I'll make you another!"

"Don't bother, you'll waste coffee!" Stubbornly refusing to hand his cup over, Doujou swallowed the liquid in big gulps, as if he were drinking medicine.

But the way he drank it for me instead of throwing it away-- she started to think, then stopped herself. There really was something wrong with her.

"You're confused because you suddenly found out the identity of your prince."

She found herself thinking of Komaki's explanation for her agitation.

"Try your best to calm down. The undeniable fact that you admired your prince, and that you gushed about him in front of the man himself, means that your perception of him hasn't changed in-- what is it now, six years? Right now you couldn't say if you liked Doujou or not if you tried, and finding out that he was actually your prince just makes it worse."

"Look at Doujou as he is now, not because he was your prince. Look at Doujou, your strict, merciless superior who you've been bickering and squabbling with since you joined the Force."

"If you don't, he'll never rest in peace either," Komaki had added as if talking to himself. Iku hadn't understood what he meant by that.

I get it! I get it, he was talking about whether or not I would still like Instructor Doujou even if he hadn't been my prince! This interpretation was behind that announcement that had caused Komaki to burst into unprecedented fits of laughter, but she knew it had to be more or less correct.

Doujou grumbled as he drank his coffee; from his facial expression, he might have been drinking *senburi*⁶. "How can you stand to drink something so sweet? Were you a stag beetle or something in a previous life?"

"Ah, right now my brain is so fried that the sugar is actually...hey, wait a minute! Did you ask if I, a human being, was a *bug* in a past life!?"

"Sheesh, don't overreact! It was a figure of speech!" Doujou slurped down the last of his coffee and put his cup down as if preparing to escape. *Ah, but he drank every last drop of it for me...gah, no! You are not allowed to activate girly mode!* Her shoulders heaved as she struggled not to yell at herself aloud.

"Ah, well, right now it's obvious what you're worrying about."

⁶ "*Senburi* is considered one of the five most medicinal herbs in Japan and is the most bitter of Japanese herbs. Its name, literally, means 'still bitter after boiling one thousand times.'" It is used as a digestive aid-- and as something friends dare each other to drink!

Her heart skipped a beat and then started hammering in her chest. *Obvious? ...How could he have--*

"The promotion exam, of course."

She exhaled a long, relieved sigh. Of course, if she thought about it long enough, it was the obvious conclusion.

Doujou took her sigh as a confirmation. "I'll help you on the written portion in my spare time, so you don't have to worry. After all, the subject of this year's practical exam is your specialty. I won't let one of you fail and have our squad become a laughingstock. Relax." Doujou frowned. "For the practical portion, I'm actually more worried about Tedzuka's performance."

"This year's task is reading to children, right?"

"Well, that's what we've been calling it. Technically, the challenge is to create a program or put on a performance that can keep twenty preschoolers entertained for the whole time. Reading them a storybook is the most quick-and-easy route, but the most popular books will be reserved on a first-come, first-served basis. A book can't be chosen more than once, so there are people who come up with sing-a-longs or stuff like that. What number are you?"

There were many people who planned to take the exam, but it wasn't as though the library could keep the children around all day. So the practical exam would take place over a period of two weeks, with personnel switching every morning and afternoon.

"Number twelve. Third day."

"That's about when all the books with popular characters will run out."

"That's okay. I never intended to rely on popular characters." Iku cocked her head. "Going back to what you said earlier--why are you more worried about Tedzuka?"

"You'll see if you watch him on duty. He's practically the prototype for men who don't know how to deal with children. He's a little better with schoolkids, but he's hopeless with younger ones. If a little kid comes up and talks to him, he looks at their parents when he answers. I expected him to come and ask me for advice before the exam, but..." He shook his head, looking dissatisfied.

"I understand how he feels," Iku murmured aloud. "He doesn't want to look incompetent in front of someone he admires. Unlike me, Tedzuka usually does everything perfectly."

The simple empathy she felt for Tedzuka caused her to voice her feelings without realizing it.

"If I was Tedzuka, I wouldn't want to ask you for help either."

When Doujou gave her a half-dubious, half-thoughtful look, she realized what had slipped out of her mouth.

"*If I was Tedzuka! Only if I was Tedzuka! Not that I'm saying I don't respect you too, but...!*"

Komaki had told her--and she agreed--that she shouldn't speak of admiring Doujou while she was still confused about his status as her prince. As things stood, it would be all too easy for admiration to accidentally turn into love.

And if that happened, I wouldn't be able to tell if it I was being influenced by how I used to feel about my prince, or if I truly just loved Instructor Doujou as he is now.

I shouldn't do something so unkind to him. Especially considering how hostile and combative I was with him before I found out he was my prince.

Uh-oh, change the subject! As she cast her eyes about the room in search of a new topic, they landed on the rank insignia Doujou wore over his left breast pocket. The design for Library Officers Second Class was a line representing a closed book, with two small chrysanthemum-like flowers lined up above it.

"I like that! How cute, it has little flowers!"

Doujou, looking like he was having trouble following the sudden change in topic, looked down at his chest in confusion. "You...mean my rank insignia?"

"If we pass this time, all we get is another line. I want a little flower soon."

The ranks of Librarian Second Class through Chief Librarian were represented by columns of lines meant to look like open books, increasing by one each time. As Librarians First Class, Iku and the others' insignia had two lines; if they qualified for Chief Librarian, it would become three. But they wouldn't receive Iku's "little flowers" until they became Library Officers Third Class.

"You won't get a *camomille*⁷ until you become a Library Officer! To wish for one before you've even taken the Chief Librarian exam is all kinds of presumptuous!" Doujou's fist descended along with his reprimand. Obviously it had been a rather brazen thing to say.

⁷ In Japanese, there are two words for chamomile: an older one imported from Dutch and a newer one imported from English. The distinction between the two words is important on this page, and will continue to be important throughout the series. Thus, I have chosen to translate the older word as "camomille," the original Old French spelling, and the newer word as "chamomile," the newer Middle English spelling.

"Owww," Iku grumbled, rubbing where he had struck her. She asked him, "By *camomille*...do you mean chamomile?"

"Is that another name for it?" Apparently this was news to Doujou. "Trust a woman to be knowledgeable about flowers."

Since it was rare for him to praise her at all, it went to her head. She informed him happily, "It's a staple in herbal tea and aromatic oil. I like its fragrance; it's sweet and refreshing. It sounds a little old fashioned to call it *camomille*, though."

"...I heard this secondhand, but..." Doujou's hand stilled over his papers and he focused his attention entirely on Iku. *Eek, that much attention feels kinda...* She fought hard to control her agitation.

"Apparently it was a flower that Commander Inamine's wife liked."

Her self-centered angst vanished.

Unconsciously, she straightened her spine.

She knew how the commander's wife had lost her life. Having been deemed worthy to hear this story, she wanted with all her heart to live up to that assessment.

"The commander was the one who decided to incorporate *camomille* flowers when the rank insignia were being designed. Do you know what *camomille* means, in the language of flowers?"

"No, sir."

The chamomile--*camomille* that Iku was familiar with was a cute white flower that resembled a daisy, an herbal and aromatherapy staple. It had a sweet, apple-like scent, and a delicate flavor that was suitable for first-time drinkers of herbal teas.

"Shyness, or first love, or something?" Iku threw out words that came to mind when she pictured the pretty little flower.

Doujou looked at her soberly. "'*Strength in adversity.*'"

She stopped breathing for a moment. The words had pierced her heart.

How fitting were those words to the Library Force's determination. Had Inamine's wife known the flower's meaning? Or had she simply liked its lovely shape and fragrance?

Whether or not she had known, what was certain was that after she died, Inamine had taken those words as a guiding precept.

Iku looked down at her lap as she digested this story, then snapped her head up.

"I will get my *camomille* one day. I swear."

Doujou smiled a little. "Go for it," he told her, returning to his paperwork--but then added, "You need to pass the Chief Librarian

promotion exam first, though," dragging Iku back to reality. She stuck out her tongue at his back.

*

"Hey, did you hear? Sunagawa's gettin' transferred to some place out in Kanagawa," one of the pair of Tedzuka's mischief-making roommates told him.

Tedzuka had already heard as much from Shibasaki, but pretended otherwise. "Oh? Well, what's gonna happen with the inquest? He caused our Force quite a bit of grief there."

"Oh, Kasahara-chan, yeah. Man, what a coward, running away and making a girl take his place."

Suspicion had fallen upon Iku because Sunagawa, in his attempt to escape the inquest, had named Iku--who really did seem like the type to have been involved--as an accomplice. According to Shibasaki, who along with an undisclosed number of others was a cadet of the Library Force's intelligence department, the entire Library Base knew by now that Iku had been his scapegoat.

"Well, it's not exactly like he could come back here."

Tedzuka also knew that the "place out in Kanagawa" was a branch library under the influence of his brother Satoshi, who was an advocate for centralized federal authority for the library. It was a good place lay low and wait for the heat to die down.

Musashino First Library Director Etou was a secret leader in Satoshi's Library of Tomorrow Project. After resolving the concealed books incident beautifully in the eyes of the world, he had not gotten involved in Sunagawa's inquest. The fact that the incident had been plotted by the Library of Tomorrow Project was something that very few people knew.

"Ain't we lucky, though? For three guys this is a huge room!" their other roommate interjected.

Is that the level that the rest of the Force thinks at? Tedzuka wondered. He shrugged. "As long as you remember that having a big room isn't an excuse to get rowdy and bring the neighbors down on us."

"We know, we know," they laughed. It was impossible to tell if they meant it. "Hey, you've got this Sunday off too, right bro? Wanna do karaoke with us? We invited some chicks too."

"Sorry, I have to pass. I said I would work a shift."

That was the day he was helping Shibasaki with story hour at another branch. He would never in a million years admit to these two that she had invited him so that he could get in some special practice for the promotion exam.

The word "work" had a profound effect on the other two. "Man, you're always so dedicated," they said, with the implication that they could never be like him. Turning away, they began to discuss their own plans.

*

The place where story hour was held turned out to be a colorful room where all the furniture was low and had rounded corners. There were a few child-sized couches and stools scattered about, but the primary seating seemed to be a thick, soft rug laid out in the center of the room. Instead of the usual linoleum floor, the room was carpeted from wall to wall.

In the corner stood a steel cabinet, about waist-high on an adult. The moment they arrived, Shibasaki ordered Tedzuka to remove it.

"It's not really in the way--can't we leave it where it is?"

"Aren't we the optimist. You never know what a child's going to run into and hurt themselves on. Sometimes they run full tilt right into walls. I can only assume that they can see something we can't. If that happens, I want you to use your body as an airbag and stop them," Shibasaki ordered dictatorially, starting to remove books from the cabinet.

"Can we help you with anything, Tedzuka-kun?" some girls asked brightly. They were from the Administrative Division and didn't often get a chance to interact with Tedzuka directly. Not sure what to say, Tedzuka glanced at Shibasaki, but she made an elaborate show of ignoring him, as if to say, "*Handle it yourself.*"

"Ah, no, I already have the supervisor's help...it would be inefficient, so find something else to do," Tedzuka said, too flustered to be polite. Disappointed, the girls left to help Shibasaki and the others.

The only other man assisting with the event besides Tedzuka was the middle-aged supervisor of the children's room. Together, they packed the books on the shelves into cardboard boxes and moved them next door. Last was the cabinet itself. Since it wasn't very tall and was now empty, Tedzuka waved away the shorter man, who had been planning to help him carry it.

"It's okay, I can do it myself. As I recall, your back gives you trouble, doesn't it?"

"Oh! Well then, carry on."

Looking not entirely displeased that a member of another division whom he didn't see often had remembered his affliction, the supervisor ceded the job to Tedzuka without protest. As he lifted the cabinet by himself, the girls oohed and aahed. *I bet it would have been better to let the supervisor look like he was helping me*, Tedzuka thought with a flash of regret. Tedzuka knew that his test scores and his position in a high-profile division, among other things, made him stand out to women, but he didn't feel like this was a very lucky thing.

Anyway, even Iku could have lifted the cabinet on her own. "...so it was nothing to get excited about," he complained to Shibasaki afterwards.

"Don't compare the rest of us to that monster," Shibasaki said, and smacked him.

And then, it was time for story hour to begin.

The very first thing that Tedzuka learned was "sit down." In that room where all the colorful furniture was low and child-sized, just standing up was enough to draw all the children's attention. There were even children who tried to climb his legs, which instantly turned into a game and spread to the others.

In a panic he peeled off the tiny mountaineers and sat down cross-legged on the spot.

Shibasaki's voice carried through the room as she instructed, "Okay, let's all sit down, everybody!"

Two or three children immediately sat in Tedzuka's lap. Their mothers came to take charge of them, but as soon as his lap was empty they were immediately replaced by different children in an endless cycle. Two children ended up sitting on his lap by default. Well, it was better than being climbed.

Though the way Shibasaki smiled in amusement when their eyes met was hard to stomach.

Since Shibasaki had commanded him to use his body to stop any children who hurtled off in unexpected directions, he vigilantly watched the room for sudden moves.

At the same time, he watched the story hour proceed. Book-reading duties were split among several librarians, of which Shibasaki was one.

What the--this has to be a hoax was what Tedzuka literally thought. The woman up there reading stories was practically a different person from the normally-caustic Shibasaki.

As she turned the pages, she flipped between facial expressions at a dizzying rate, and used a different voice for every character--from children to animals to old women--to engage the children. When their attention wandered, she skillfully ad-libbed lines that weren't in the book to draw them back again.

Above all, the way she wasn't embarrassed to adjust her voice--now high, now low, now loud, now soft--to entertain the children as she read them a storybook was nothing short of amazing. Even Tedzuka, who knew Shibasaki's true character, was momentarily captivated by the image of her skillful handling of the children. He was strangely irked by the fact.

Before this I never would have thought of "Shibasaki" and "maternal behavior" in the same sentence!

We're talking about the same woman who took the watch that symbolized the rift between me and my brother and pawned it of all things! And who doesn't hesitate for one second to use her looks to get what she wants! She sits there with her angel's face amusing the kids, and all the while she's probably snarking about them in her head. "Damn brats, why won't you listen!?"

And most vexing of all was the fact that as he watched Shibasaki, he began, just a little, to understand why men fell for her.

Those who weren't close enough to her to see her true personality fell for her charming facade; those who were close enough fell for the contrast between the facade and what lay beneath.

Some time after Shibasaki's turn had ended, she suddenly popped up beside Tedzuka.

"What do you think?"

I think you're an impostor, he wanted to say. Instead, he pretended to be concentrating on the librarian who was currently reading. "You're all very good," he answered. "But I couldn't possibly do it like you do." In a soft voice he added, "You're too good." It was a reluctant admission of defeat. Tedzuka was too shy and embarrassed to attempt theatrical reading tactics to hold children's attention.

"You couldn't do it if you tried," Shibasaki told him, her tone just a little kinder than usual. "But if you think we're good, you've still got a long way to go. Though..." Shibasaki jerked her chin, indicating the

children sitting in his lap. "You do seem to have figured out how to see things from the kids' point of view."

"No, I just...I sat down because when I was standing up, they climbed on me." Tedzuka wasn't sure if her assessment was a compliment or not, so he downplayed it.

Shibasaki laughed, not entirely sarcastically. "That's what I meant by their point of view."

Ah--I get it. They wanted to climb me because--

"...they wanted to see what the world looked like from up there," he murmured. But Shibasaki was gone, having silently slipped away from his side like a cat. How very like her, to leave as soon as she said what she came to say.

*

Tedzuka and Shibasaki passed the written exam easily, and thanks to Doujou's rigorous tutoring, Iku managed to scrape through too.

The practical exam awaited them next, and every examinee was making feverish preparations. When the book reservation process finally opened up, all of the books whose popularity with children was indisputable were "sold out" in an instant.

"...So just how are *your* preparations going?" Doujou asked dubiously.

Iku, dressed in a track suit, was kneeling in the entryway tying her sneakers. Every day after her shift ended lately, she had put on the same outfit and left to go somewhere. She didn't go especially far; from what he could tell she just went walking in the yards and gardens on the library's grounds.

Iku's behavior was out of place at a time when all the other young examinees were practicing reading aloud together whenever they had a spare moment. For Doujou, her behavior was worrisome.

"There's no reason my program *has* to involve reading storybooks, right? Don't worry, I'm working hard on preparations of my own." Iku grinned impishly and exited the entryway. Doujou watched her go with a sour expression. Suddenly he felt someone's chin resting on his shoulder; when he turned around he found Komaki.

"She doesn't need a babysitter, Squad Leader."

Komaki, who was of equal rank and tenure, only called Doujou "Squad Leader" when he wanted to tease him or chide him.

In this case, it was probably the latter.

"She's good with kids. It'll be okay."

"I'm just worried because she has a tendency to screw up at the most important times..."

"And anyhow, shouldn't you be more worried about Tedzuka?"

Tedzuka's inability to deal with children was crystal clear to his two superior officers.

"He seems to be coming up with a plan on his own. It's not my place as his superior to interfere."

Komaki's eyebrows rose to his hairline. "--she's not the only one whose attitude hasn't changed in six years," he said to himself mysteriously as he left.

"Shibasaki, what number are you?" Iku asked when they were back in their room.

"Last one on the last day," her friend answered carelessly.

"Damn but that's bad luck! Are you gonna be okay?"

"Sure. It's exactly what I wanted."

Iku didn't understand the confidence that would drive someone to actually *ask for* such an unlucky position.

"A better question is, are *you* gonna be okay? You don't seem to be preparing like mad like everyone else..."

"Heh heh heh," Iku chuckled as she happily continued working on a part of her own "preparation."

Shibasaki peered at the sheet of drawing paper laid out under Iku's arm. "Wow, you're surprisingly good!" she complimented.

"I got A's in Art," Iku said smugly, tracing over the rough pencil lines with magic marker.

Compared with Iku, who seemed to have half-forgotten about the exam and was having fun--

"I wonder if the honor student is going to be all right," Shibasaki murmured as she sipped her tea. She didn't sound as though the thought distressed her much.

*

Iku was the first of the three to take the practical exam.

It wasn't the rule, but it was usual for the examinee's superior officers or close friends to come and watch.

"So just what the hell are you doing anyway?"

Iku was still keeping her plan a secret from the squad until the last possible minute. Doujou seemed more nervous than she was.

Iku didn't seem to have prepared a storybook. All she had were cardboard boxes, which she carried into the story room one by one. "It's not time to open them yet!" she called out pleasantly at first when the children tried to peek inside; eventually that devolved into "Quit trying to open 'em, or I'm gonna steal your noses, you brats!" Her outburst only made the children more boisterous, and they shrieked with excitement.

Once Iku had finished carrying in all the boxes, she divided the twenty children into groups of five and gave each group a box.

"Okay! We're gonna do a puzzle! You can open the boxes now! Take out everything inside!"

In their boxes the children found a variety of leaves, nuts, berries, and pinecones--about twenty in all--along with several sheets of drawing paper covered with corresponding outlines.

"Can you match the leaves and berries to the ones drawn on your papers? Put your leaves and berries on top of the pictures that match! Ask your friends for help, and if you're still having trouble, you can come and ask me!"

"Not bad," Komaki whistled as he observed the proceedings.

An event with a game element (a treasure hunt, for instance) was more likely to hold children's interest in the first place. And this one was educational, making it more praiseworthy in the abstract as well.

The children became engrossed in mixing-and-matching the plant parts with the outlines drawn on their papers.

"Miss Iku, there's no 'sawtooth oak' in our box!"

"There must be! I definitely put it in. Look veeery carefully!"

"Ohh! It's the acorn! Its hat came off!" the child realized, triumphantly reuniting acorn and cap.

When the children had finished their "puzzles," Iku brought out an illustrated encyclopedia. It was a large book with big drawings and photographs, meant for children.

"Look, this is what the seeds of the Oriental plane tree look like! And this is what the leaves of the cherry tree look like when they change color! You've all seen cherry trees in the spring--they're by the entrance to the library."

As a country girl, her knowledge in this area was unrivaled.

"The cherry tree leaves used to be green!"

"You're right! When they turn colors like this, they start to fall off the branch and dry up."

Iku's time was almost up; she used her last minute to address the children.

"I found all the leaves, berries, and seeds we used in the puzzle today on the ground in the yard that surrounds the library. If you had fun today, why don't you try looking for the different leaves and nuts and flowers that appear around the library in each different season? But don't go picking everything you see--you can borrow a book on plants and use it when you're outside."

At the very end there was a brief quarrel among the children who wanted to keep the boxes they had used for the puzzle; the dispute was resolved with a few rounds of rock-paper-scissors, and then Iku's turn was over. There was no question that she would receive a passing grade.

"What did you think?"

As soon as Iku left the story room, she flew over to Doujou. Her proud expression made it easy to see that she wanted to be praised; ever the contrarian, Doujou scowled. The way his friend, who had needed him about his excessive concern, was grinning beside him didn't help.

"I have no complaints."

"My, is that all?" Komaki asked brightly but pointedly.

Iku looked vaguely unsatisfied. His gaze slid away from that childish expression as he added, "It was very creative, you did a good job taking your own specialized knowledge and transforming it into an organized presentation, and it was well-received by the children. So no complaints here."

While other examinees had been squabbling over the books with popular characters that nearly guaranteed a good reception and an easy pass, one tracksuit-clad woman had been running around the library grounds, working toward a truly impressive goal.

He was forced to recognize that there was more to his subordinate than rashness and recklessness. It wasn't easy.

"You did a damn good job! There! Are you happy now!?"

"Wh-Why are you getting angry at me in the middle of complimenting me! Are you just incapable of giving me praise!?"

It was a bit of a relief to have Iku shrieking at him as usual, but his mood soured when he noticed Komaki grinning at him again.

*

The second of them to take the practical exam was Tedzuka, on the fifth day.

"What did you decide on?"

Outside the story room, Tedzuka showed the four of them the cover of a storybook. They had all come to see him perform, though the women had come mostly come for the spectacle. The book he had chosen was a volume from the *Aesop's Fables* series.

"Fables, huh? That's about what I'd expect from you. Or rather, I'm not surprised," Shibasaki teased him right away.

Tedzuka scowled. "It's not what you think...when I was looking for a book, I found these. I hadn't read them in a long time, and I'd mostly forgotten all of the stories. When I started reading, I found myself simply enjoying them. Anyway, they should be easy to read even for me, since each story is so short."

"Did you read them all?" Doujou asked.

Tedzuka shook his head. "I borrowed a random book from the series and haven't looked inside. Since I'm not used to kids, I thought that, rather than trying to do a good job, it would be better to read a book I myself was interested in and enjoy it along with the children."

He did not look at Shibasaki as he spoke. Shibasaki also casually looked away.

Doujou and Komaki exchanged a look, and then Doujou smiled. "Looks like you'll be fine."

"You want to hold my hand, see if my luck rubs off on you?" The author of this cheeky comment was Iku, whose passing was, for once, already assured.

Tedzuka shot her a dark look. "Why would I want your luck!? Don't get a big head!"

"What? I was just trying to do you a favor," Iku grumbled. Ignoring her completely, he bowed to his superiors and opened the door of the story room, which was already full of rambunctious children.

In general, Tedzuka's delivery was halting and could not really be called smooth. When the children interrupted him to ask the inevitable "Why?" his answers were flustered and less than coherent. But at least he seemed more comfortable with the children, and was able to speak directly to them.

"...why are the kids sitting there so quietly and listening, if he's so bad?"

Not one of the children had lost interest and started to act up or go play. They all gathered around Tedzuka, who was sitting cross-legged in the center of the room, and listened attentively to his flawed recitation.

Shibasaki casually answered Iku's naïve question. "That's the mysterious thing about kids. They'll pay less attention to a smooth performance by an experienced reader than a terrible performance by an unfamiliar, inexperienced man."

"Back in the day, Doujou was saved by that fact more times than I can count," Komaki put in unexpectedly.

Iku made a noise of surprise. Though she had not spoken, Doujou told her, "Shut up," cutting off any further discussion.

"Maybe it's because he's trying so hard, in his own inept way," Iku murmured, watching Tedzuka. Sitting at the same eye level as the children and reading haltingly to them, Tedzuka exuded a clumsy but dogged persistence that was hard to imagine coming from this usually perfect performer.

The last story in the book was "The Fox and the Grapes." The children clamored for answers when it was done ("Why couldn't he get the grapes?" "Why didn't he bring a ladder?" "Why didn't he bring a friend and stand on their shoulders?"), but the loudest question was, "Was the fox a dummy?" It seemed to sum up the rest.

Tedzuka, obviously sweating, began to speak. "I don't think it's that this fox was a dummy. It's that you're all so good and determined. This fox thought it was cooler to just give up on the grapes, rather than to think of a clever plan to get to them, or to call a friend and try to reach the grapes together. But the fox wasn't cool at all, was he? Everyone, try to be someone cool, who doesn't give up on grapes."

Tedzuka bowed solemnly to the children and walked out of the story room. Letting out a long breath, he slumped against the wall.

"Good work," Doujou said, lightly clapping him on the shoulder. It was only then that Tedzuka finally felt that the ordeal was over.

"*Everyone, try to be someone cool, who doesn't give up on grapes,*" Iku mimicked, clearly intending to mock him.

Tedzuka smacked her.

"Oww! I can see sparks shooting out of your eyes! Why don't you lighten up on me a little!"

"Don't make fun of someone when they're being sincere!" He blushed at he said it, forced to realize all over again that every word he had said to those children had been sincere.

Suddenly he looked around and discovered that Shibasaki was gone. Komaki was quick to notice and told him, "If you're looking for Shibasaki-san, she returned to her duties. She approved of your performance, though. 'Nothing to worry about there,' she said."

"...Oh," Tedzuka said, nodding uncertainly.

"*Nothing to worry about.*" It was probably high praise from Shibasaki, but he still felt vaguely disappointed. *Couldn't she have stayed till the end?* But since it was Shibasaki, there was no point in complaining.

The very last of the three to take the practical exam--indeed the very last of all the examinees to take it--was Shibasaki. The tale of her exam would become a legend in the Library Force.

"Well, I had wanted to teach them a lesson at some point," Shibasaki said afterwards.

The children that Shibasaki faced at the very last session were, in a word, notorious.

Their mothers thought of the children's room at the library as nothing but a free daycare. After stopping just long enough to deposit their children inside, they left to go chatter endlessly together in the cafe. It goes without saying that their children lacked much discipline.

These children never listened to the librarians in charge. They liked to run around, they liked to make noise, and they liked to pick on the other kids. Once, they took over a hundred-thousand-yen reference computer and abused it to the point of destruction. Their parents refused to pay for the damage, blaming the librarians for not watching their children more closely. It was then that Shibasaki decided to punish them.

The notorious group was approached about coming in for the last examinee, and of course, the mothers willingly accepted.

"But I did *aaaabsolutely* nothing. All I did was read a storybook!"

"Cut the innocent act," Tedzuka interrupted, scowling. "You chose a ghost story and then purposely turned out all the lights at the scariest part, pretending there had been an accident!"

"What a thing to say! It *was* an accident!"

"If by 'accident,' you mean a carefully orchestrated plot involving another person, maybe!"

Ah, I'm guessing Tedzuka was her accomplice, Iku nodded to herself, listening as the conversation flowed. Iku had tried her best, but she just hadn't been able to rearrange her shifts so that she could go watch Shibasaki's exam.

"So which book was it?" Iku asked.

Shibasaki grinned wickedly. "*Funa yuurei.*"

"Damn! That's not very mature of you!"

The image of a ghostly hand creeping over the side of a boat and using a ladle to slowly fill the boat with water was still a little traumatic for Iku, even as an adult.

"And she read the version where the ladle *didn't* have holes in it⁸! And she was really convincing when she did the voices and the acting!"

The children were listening, paralyzed, to Shibasaki's magnificent rendition of the ghost story when Tedzuka caused the little "accident." The agonizing screams that followed were straight out of a scene from Hell.

That said, Shibasaki calmed them down skillfully enough that none of the children fled the room, so there was no question of her passing.

"I was wavering between that and Ogawa Mimei's 'The Red Candles and the Mermaid,' but that kind of irrational terror really doesn't work on kids unless they're a little older, don't you think? So I decided to go the direct route."

"*Didn't the mothers complain afterward?*" Iku started to ask, and then stopped. It went without saying that Shibasaki would have wrapped the mothers around her little finger.

Incidentally, the behavior of these notorious children improved a little after that. Especially if the librarian in charge ever threatened to bring back Shibasaki.

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Those who had passed the exam were quickly awarded the additional line on their rank insignia.

As rumor had it, many of those who had tried to go the easy route by picking books with popular characters had failed. Stories appeared one after another of exams dissolving into chaos--of children

⁸ "Some boats carry a specially prepared ladle with holes drilled in it. This way, when the pass over the ladle the *funa yurei* are unable to fill the boat with water and they can make their escape."

already too familiar with the book, fighting over it without letting the examinee read a word.

Those who had failed this round would be able to take the next exam, in six months.

"Go us!"

The three were showing off their new insignia to each other. For Iku and Tedzuka, at least, it was an emotional moment. There had never been any serious doubt that Shibasaki would pass. Tedzuka's passing had been more or less assured as well, though he had encountered a hurdle with the practical exam, and he was relieved to have cleared it. As for Iku--well, it goes without saying that there had been serious hurdles for her.

"I still don't understand how you aced the practical exam but only managed to pass the written portion by the skin of your teeth."

"Cause the practical exam covered something I was actually good at."

Without Doujou's help, she would have never passed the written exam.

"All you have to do to pass is memorize the library handbook! Why the hell can't you keep more than twenty percent of it in your head!? You've only been carrying it around for TWO YEARS, nitwit!" the demon instructor had shouted, striking her on the head with a sheaf of rolled-up papers. Still... *"I won't let one of you fail and have our squad become a laughingstock."* He had delivered on that promise.

But this is the last time we'll all get promoted together.

She kept that whisper of doubt hidden deep within her heart. Tedzuka and Shibasaki were both stars, and Iku could never measure up to them. When the time came, they would be promoted steadily through the ranks.

In every organization there was a necessary hierarchy. If there were some who rose to Library Supervisor, there also had to be those who never made it past Library Officer.

Iku already knew that she would never be a Library Supervisor.

"Hey guys."

She wasn't even sure what she was feeling anymore--whether it was jealousy, or despair. She clung to Shibasaki, on the verge of tears. "I'm gonna get a *camomille* someday too, okay? We can still be friends even if I can't keep up with you two, right?"

"W-Why are you crying all of a sudden!?" Tedzuka took a step back, perturbed.

Shibasaki smiled at him, then bent down and patted Iku on the head. "Don't worry, dear. We'll still be friends even after I become the first female base commander in the Library Force."

"Whoa whoa whoa!" Tedzuka interrupted. "Am I hearing things, or did you just casually share some terrifying ambition of yours?"

Shibasaki scowled at him. "Are you saying I couldn't do it?"

"No, and the fact that I can't dismiss the idea is what's so terrifying," Tedzuka started to grumble, and Iku burst out laughing. Indeed, it was impossible to dismiss even such a wild ambition, when it came from Shibasaki.

"Your goal is to surpass Officer Doujou, isn't it?" Tedzuka asked her suddenly. He was referring to a declaration Iku had made long before, when they had talked about whether or not to try dating each other. "I think you'll go far if you pursue that goal. Although I admit I don't know much about that other guy you admire so much."

Tedzuka, who didn't know that the two were the same person, probably meant it as honest encouragement, but it only served to agitate Iku.

Shibasaki rose on her tiptoes and put her mouth near Iku's ear. "You're the kind of person whose true power comes out when you're chasing after the person you love. You might surprise us all with how well you catch up to him."

Iku froze. Shibasaki pulled away smoothly and walked away with her usual nimble gait.

Iku didn't unfreeze until Tedzuka, frowning in incomprehension, had shaken her several times.

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Back in the office, Doujou was staring down at the tabulated results of the promotion exam, which had been distributed to the direct supervisor of each examinee.

"Those scores sure leave an impression," Komaki grinned, leaning over to peek at the results with him.

Her name was listed *just* a little above the pass/fail line for the written exam--almost apologetically. But her scores on the practical exam for creativity, planning ability, and audience reaction were head and shoulders above everyone else.

Needless to say, these were Iku's scores.

"Apparently they've never seen such a creative presentation before. She's also had a lasting effect on the kids--I've heard more of them have been spotted playing out in the yard than usual."

"...I know," Doujou replied sullenly.

Komaki shrugged at him, then got up and left.

When he first met her, she had been a helpless high school student. Perhaps it was he, not she, who was still fettered by that past. When he had seen that tall, dignified girl facing down censorship without a scrap of authority, not even the rules he was violating had been enough to stop him from reaching out to her.

But Iku hadn't stayed a high school student forever. And it wasn't six years ago anymore; it was today.

Today, Iku was a full-fledged Library Force member who had passed the promotion exam and had the rights and responsibilities of a Chief Librarian. And though she was hot-tempered and reckless, she definitely wasn't useless as a subordinate.

Even granting that she had been lucky that the practical exam was suited to her talents, such impressive results made him proud that she was his subordinate--just as proud as he was to have Tedzuka.

During the incident with the concealed books, she had weathered the bitter storm of popular opinion all by herself. And when Tedzuka's brother had invited her out and offered her a deal, she had heard him out and refused him.

He couldn't possibly gloss over her daily mistakes, but as a Library Force member and as a subordinate, she was someone her superior could depend on. --He snorted at his own all-too-obvious attempts to hide behind the word "superior."

Iku was a subordinate Doujou could depend on. She had different uses and talents than Tedzuka, but their level of dependability was the same. --Yes, even compared to that superstar Tedzuka.

It would be disrespectful to not use Iku in a way commensurate with her current abilities. Maybe that was what Komaki meant by his attitude not changing at all in the last six years.

Or maybe not, came the overprotective thought, then he grew irritated with his own inflexible nature. He was also annoyed at Iku, who was trying to improve so fast.

Slow down! he wanted to shout at her sometimes.

She loved to run wherever her legs wanted to take her, but when she didn't look where she was going, she would fall down and scrape

herself up. Because of that, he couldn't keep himself from worrying about her, no matter how much time passed.

He wondered if things might get easier for him if he told her, *"Stop running so recklessly, because I can't keep my cool when you do,"* but he had a feeling that speaking those words would be crossing a line, so he discarded the idea.

"At the very least, I better tell her she did a good job."

Doujou's gaze dropped back down to the exam results.

*

At any other time, Iku had no trouble catching Doujou alone--but now, when she had a particular reason to, she was having a very hard time.

Eventually, she caught him in the hallway on the way back to the office after a training session. There might be someone in the office again when they got back, she thought, and her impatience got the better of her and caused her to call out, "Instructor Doujou!"

With a puzzled look, Doujou stopped and waited for Iku to catch up.

She hadn't run very hard, but her heart was pounding and it was hard to breathe.

"Um..."

What now? How should I start?

"Thank you for helping me with the written exam!"

She said the words in one big rush, then bowed her head low.

Perhaps Doujou was thinking about her terrible memory and the other challenges he had had to overcome, because for a moment he looked like he was going to say something, but settled on, "Well, you ended up doing all right."

"If you hadn't helped me, I would have failed right there."

"No doubt."

Did you really need to add that little jab? I'm trying to be nice here! Iku pouted, when Doujou added unexpectedly, "But your performance on the practical exam was highly regarded. You got rave reviews from the examiners, who praised your plan for its creativity and how it made the children eager to learn. Also, the staff of the children's room want to consider adding your lesson to their program. The request just came through to the Task Force."

Iku stared at him. She knew she must look like the proverbial deer in the headlights.

"Can I tell them it's okay?" Doujou asked. Iku nodded mechanically, and was rewarded with a sweet smile from Doujou-- something so rare she could count the number of times she had seen it before on one hand. "Be proud. You got the top score on the practical exam. You'll hear no complaints from me."

"But on the written exam--"

"Don't worry about the written exam for now. You don't get many chances to enjoy the top slot. Take pride while you can."

"...why do I feel like I don't want to just nod along with that assessment...?" Iku scowled.

Doujou averted his eyes from her. "I did you an injustice," he said unexpectedly. "While you were working by yourself to create that amazing program, all I did was worry that you were going to screw up again. No, 'worry' is too good a word for it--honestly, I underestimated you. I'm sorry." Doujou bowed his head to Iku.

"Auuughhh! No no no!" Iku screamed before she could stop herself. "Stop, please! It's seriously disturbing when you do that to me!"

"...when someone's trying to be sincere, surely you could find a better word to use than 'disturbing'..." Doujou's tone was suddenly frosty.

Why?? Why does it always turn out like this!? All I wanted to do was approach him and express my gratitude the way any other girl would!

"Thank you for helping me with the written exam!" I'd say, then--

Oh, screw it!

"Here!" Iku drew out the small package she had been gripping tightly inside her pocket since the conversation started, and thrust it at Doujou.

She had known she was being excessively self-conscious, but she had been so mortified by the thought of running into anyone while shopping that she hadn't gone to Kichijouji, the usual shopping destination for Library Force members. Instead, she had gone by herself all the way to Tachikawa. Since she was still afraid of being seen, she searched the station building for the right shop. She found it after taking the escalator up a few floors, on a level with a high concentration of women.

A number of women were there, picking up or putting down tester bottles, but Iku plucked her purchase up without hesitation and carried it over to the cashier.

When the cashier asked if it was for her own use or a gift for someone else, she chewed the question over and eventually decided to have it wrapped at a present. Because she was worried about more elaborate packaging getting torn or squashed, she chose a simple wrapping, with a blue bow. But after this exchange with Doujou, even that little bow was crumpled and creased.

"It's a gift! For helping me with the exam!"

She had played out this scene in her mind. "*Go ahead and open it!*" she would coax him, and then they would talk a little about the present. Well, her fantasy was ruined now.

"I'll see you back in the office. Excuse me, sir!" She gave an exaggerated, sarcastic bow and started running in the direction of the locker rooms.

"Wait!"

He shouted the word like an order, and her body froze mid-stride.

"Come back here."

Dammit! She couldn't resist his commanding voice, and it rankled. Scowling, Iku returned to Doujou. He had torn open the wrapping, extracted the small box it contained, and was shaking it next to his ear.

"What is this? Some kind of liquid...?"

"...Why don't you open it and find out, *sir?*" she suggested sullenly, bitter that her plans to cheerfully encourage him--"*Go ahead and open it!*"--had all come to nothing.

She hadn't seen it herself, but she knew that the box Doujou was opening should contain a small bottle of deep blue.

"Chamomile'..." Doujou read off the label.

"These days, you can't find anything labeled '*camomille*' anymore."

"So what exactly is this?" Doujou, genuinely mystified, opened the bottle and held it up to his nose. She didn't try to stop him, since even concentrated, the scent of chamomile was mild enough to sniff directly.

"Essential oil, sir. You're supposed to use it with a diffuser or something like that, something that's made to heat up a drop or two and spread the scent through a room. I thought the oil would be enough if all you wanted was to know what it smelled like. When we

were talking about *camomille* the other day, it seemed like you didn't know much about the flower itself, so..."

"So this is basically essence of *camomille*?" Iku nodded. Doujou stood silently for a long moment, breathing in the scent from the bottle. "...it has a nice smell."

"I like it."

"So do I."

Her heartbeat quickened, though she knew that Doujou was just agreeing with her opinion on the scent of *camomille*. *Stop beating so fast! This should be mortifying, after that scene we just had!*

"Didn't you say you could drink it, too?"

"Yes," Iku began to nod, then made a hasty prohibitive gesture. "As tea! You can't drink that oil directly!"

"Oh, I see," Doujou said, looking disappointed. Apparently he really had been intending to drink it. "Do you have any of that tea?"

"I think they sell it in teabags... Brewing herbal tea can be tricky, so I don't trust myself to make it myself. When I want to drink it, I go to a tea shop."

"*Would you like me to try and find you some teabags?*" she started to ask, when Doujou preempted her.

"Will you take me to a tea shop that serves it sometime? I'd also like to see the flower itself in bloom, if possible."

"*Uh, it sounds like you're asking me out on a date, sir,*" she almost said, then swallowed the impulse. If she pointed it out, Doujou would definitely withdraw the invitation--*and why am I trying to keep that from happening?*

"I mean, I've been wearing this *camomille* on my chest and yet I don't know anything about the real thing. So I thought I'd ask for a lesson from the plant expert."

Was Doujou just making an excuse?

"Thanks," he said, waving the bottle.

Iku, her body stiff, shook her head fiercely. "No, thank *you*--I mean, it was a thank-you gift after all."

This time, Doujou did go back to the office, and Iku headed toward the locker room. Hugging the jacket she wore for training to her chest, she walked, her pace growing faster and faster.

"Look at Doujou as he is now, not because he was your prince. Look at Doujou, your strict, merciless superior who you've been bickering and squabbling with since you joined the Force."

Her other superior's advice flashed through her mind.
And now, it wasn't because he had been her prince.
Even if he *hadn't* been her prince--
Even if her prince had never existed in the first place--
Did I--by any chance--maybe--probably--

I think I went from admiring Instructor Doujou to actually liking him.

Her knees gave way, and she sank to the floor.
"I can't--This is as far as I can go--"
If I think any more about this my heart's gonna stop! she
thought, clutching her modestly-sized chest and gulping deep breaths.

Chapter 3, Distorted Words

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Orikuchi Maki's assignment that day was to interview a young, up-and-coming actor. When she asked for an assistant to come along, the male volunteers were immediately elbowed out by the women, who began a furious tournament of rock-paper-scissors. From this spectacle she could infer his popularity.

A high-pitched squeal arose; apparently the victor had been decided.

"It's nice that you're excited, but you better not screw up," she warned, directing her chosen assistant to prepare their equipment. Orikuchi checked it when she was done--usually she would trust an assistant with such a task, but today this one seemed liable to forget something or make some other blunder in her euphoria.

The interview would take place at the actor's office; apparently so would any photography. Orikuchi, who would be acting as the photographer as well as the interviewer, preferred outdoor shoots because of the light, but since they couldn't spare enough people to keep away curious onlookers just so she could snap a few pictures to decorate an interview article, she was philosophical about it.

The office was only a few stops away on the Yamanote Line, but since they had a lot of equipment, she hailed a taxi. Her assistant sat beside her, stars in her eyes.

"Ooooh, when I took this job I never *dreamed* I would get to meet Kousaka Daichi..."

"Swoon all you want now, but for heaven's sake don't even think about doing it during the interview. You'll embarrass the whole company."

Her assistant stuck out her lower lip in a pout at this warning. "But it's Kousaka Daichiiii! How can you be so calm about it, Orikuchi-san?"

"He's a little too young for me to be swooning over."

"He's known for being popular with older ladies too!"

Her assistant's total lack of malice just made her comment more devastating. Orikuchi turned her wrist over to look at her watch.

"Hmm, I could go back to the office and trade in the little missy who would call her boss an 'older lady' and still make it in plenty of time."

"Nooooo! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please don't trade me in!!"

Her assistant's puppy-dog eyes convinced Orikuchi not to turn the taxi around. After that, she seemed to calm down, at least enough to chat with Orikuchi.

"What kind of man *is* your type, Orikuchi-san?"

Given her position, it had been a long time since someone had asked her that question. Her thoughts froze.

"Like, what actor, for example?" she pressed.

An actor!? I'm supposed to compare him to an actor? Him??

Amid her flusterment, she suddenly realized that *he* was still the first person that came to mind when asked about men she liked, and smiled wryly.

Sure. I mean, it's not like we broke up because we hated each other.

She remembered the last thing Genda had said to her before he moved out of the apartment they had shared together and back into the Library Base dorm.

"Well, tell you what. If it turns out you're gonna be wearing the red chanchanko on your sixtieth birthday⁹ all alone, I'll do you a favor and marry you myself."

"That's my line!" she laughed--she cried--while smacking his massive chest with a cushion. *"Now get out of here, stupid!"*

Genda left the apartment, waving at her over his shoulder. Had he been laughing, or had he been crying?

"I'm curious, because you're still single even though you're so beautiful," her assistant said, interrupting her reminiscence. Apparently she was trying to make up for her earlier faux pas.

"My type, huh." She tried in vain to think of an actor who resembled him--but no matter how hard she tried, it was easier to come up with animals than humans. "Out of the zodiac animals, maybe the tiger, or the wild boar?" she replied with difficulty.

Her assistant bit her lip in thought, and finally asked, "...so, like, the bad-boy type?"

Orikuchi burst out laughing. She wasn't *wrong*, but the image the words conjured up was much too sexy to be entirely *right*.

⁹ In Japan, celebration of a sixtieth birthday involves wearing a red, short-sleeved coat called a *chanchanko*. Since the traditional calendar (based on the Chinese calendar) was arranged in sixty-year cycles, one's sixtieth birthday represented a return to the sign one was born under and hence a return to childhood--hence the *chanchanko*, a garment traditionally worn by children.

One could preach about the purity of journalism until one was blue in the face, but without capital, such journalism would never be published. To that end, even the editorial department at *New World Weekly* sometimes put out special editions or *mooks*¹⁰ that were sure to sell well. Since weekly magazines were the most heavily targeted medium when it came to censorship, they had to do something to level the playing field.

This time they would be putting out a special edition focusing on Kousaka Daichi, a young, popular rising star. He had debuted in his late teens, and his healthy good looks had immediately won him a teen idol's popularity. But these days he was also earning respect for his solid performances in several television dramas, and he was now counted among the ranks of those young actors who had proven that they could actually act.

He was famous for the story that when he had taken the role of a sports player, he had worked with a trainer to develop the right musculature for the sport. His co-stars valued him for the unstinting hard work he would put into a role.

It had been decided during planning that the concept for Kousaka Daichi's special issue was that several reporters would dig deeply into various aspects of his life. Orikuchi's assignment was his personal history.

"Up until now, Kousaka-kun hasn't made his profile or anything like that public. I wonder why he OK'd an interview about his upbringing this time?"

Before, his agency had been equally unwilling to allow such an interview; apparently Kousaka Daichi himself had granted permission after looking over *New World Weekly's* plan for the issue.

For *New World Weekly*, then, this interview had to be treated with some measure of prudence, which is why a veteran like Orikuchi was put in charge of it.

"Not to repeat myself, but remember--once the interview starts, your job is to babysit the equipment and take notes. Not a peep from you, unless it's something neutral like 'Hmmm' or 'I see.' I won't allow it. Keep that in mind."

At Orikuchi's suddenly deadly serious tone, her assistant paled a little and nodded fervently.

¹⁰ Remember, a *mook* is a book with the look, design, and layout of a magazine. From "magazine" and "book."

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Kousaka's agency, Office Turn, had a building in Tokyo's Harbor Ward. They were a major company in the entertainment business, which was basic knowledge for a reporter who worked for a weekly magazine, since they dealt in entertainment often.

They informed the receptionist of their appointment and were shown to one of the conference rooms.

Orikuchi was surprised to find that her interviewee had already arrived, and was waiting with his manager. At a glance, it was easy to see why Kousaka Daichi could make girls squeal and charm older ladies too. He stood and offered his greetings before even his manager.

"I'm Kousaka Daichi. Pleased to meet you."

"I'm Orikuchi from *New World Weekly*. The pleasure is all mine." As she passed him her business card, she gave her assistant a sharp kick in the back of the ankle. The smitten, staring woman returned to her senses and gave him her business card as well, delivering a stammering introduction. Kousaka was probably used to her reaction, for he smiled at her without a trace of awkwardness.

His manager took their cards as a matter of course, and only he returned one of his own.

Their interviewee was a busy man, so after taking a few moments to set up the tape recorder and note-taking materials, they got down to business.

"You mentioned today that we could talk about your personal history..."

Kousaka Daichi's profile had been kept from the public, and he had never talked about his upbringing during television interviews or anywhere else--until now. This scoop alone would bump up their sales by tens of thousands of copies. The editorial department still hadn't discovered why Kousaka, or his agency, had chosen to offer it to *New World Weekly*.

Kousaka, perhaps mindful of the recorder, propped himself up with his elbows and leaned forward.

"To tell you the truth, I've been wanting to talk about my upbringing for a long time now." As he spoke, he shot a look at his

manager, who shrugged. "They strictly forbade it, saying it would damage my image."

From that preface, Orikuchi could pretty much guess the rest, though she maintained an expression of keen interest. He was illegitimate, or an orphan, or there was trouble in his family--perhaps he was even some famous actor's bastard.

"But now that I've started to earn my keep, I decided that the agency could let me have my way at least this once. *New World Weekly* had the good luck and timing to submit their proposal around that time. --Ah, perhaps it's rude of me to say it that way."

"Not at all. In fact, we were very curious to know why you entrusted our magazine with such an important story."

"Because print endures," he said simply. His pithy eloquence rendered Orikuchi momentarily speechless. "Also, *New World Weekly* is a significant magazine, and it had the ability to reach and influence society. And I thought that any reporter who helped sustain one of the two largest weekly magazines in Japan would be rigorous and conscientious in interviewing subjects and gathering facts. Your proposal for the special issue was sound as well."

"Omigod, he's so *smart*..." she heard her assistant sigh softly. She couldn't bring herself to disagree.

If I keep thinking of him as just a former pop idol, it's going to trip me up, Orikuchi thought, sitting up a little straighter.

"Well, we appreciate it."

"Oh no, please don't thank me. I chose *New World Weekly* because it suited me, after all. I had other offers." Kousaka scratched his head and smiled wryly. "If I had a hundred yen for every offer I had to get a ghostwriter to write my autobiography, I'd be rich. And sure, I don't have any talent for writing, but I didn't want a stranger writing my life story. Nor did I want to talk about it on TV. A broadcast, by definition, doesn't last, unless the viewer happened to record it."

His manager interjected, "Ah, please keep that off the record. It would create problems for the agency." They probably managed many other stars who *had* used ghostwriters. Not to mention Kousaka's comment about not wanting to speak on TV would adversely affect his work.

Kousaka continued as if this interruption had never happened, a talent probably acquired over the course of many interviews. "I wanted to put my story in a medium that a normal person could hold in their hands and keep. And I have a family member who would be pleased if

that medium was *New World Weekly*." Kousaka beamed. *Ahh, I wish I could get a picture of that expression*, the photographer part of Orikuchi's mind observed out of habit. "Grandpop--he's been reading *New World* for decades."

Until then he had maintained a mature, grown-up façade, but the way he said "Grandpop" instead of "my grandfather" let her catch a sudden glimpse of the little boy lurking beneath the surface.

*

As a child, I was abandoned by my parents.

Do you understand what I'm saying? Not just by my mother, not just by my father.

But by both of them.

It happened before I entered elementary school.

My parents were both having affairs, and they both wanted to separate and start new lives. I was in the way. Though they never fought about alimony or how to divide up the household, they were downright hostile whenever the subject of who would take me came up.

I remember not feeling sad about it at all. By the time I was old enough to understand what was going on, I knew that my parents' relationship was damaged beyond repair, and I also knew that neither of them wanted me.

I spent a lot of time watching the river over the guardrail of the bridge, thinking that if they didn't want me, they should never have made me in the first place. Thinking that if I fell from the bridge and died, they would probably be happy about it.

Both of my parents probably wanted to push me onto the other, discreetly separate, and then nonchalantly inform their families of the divorce. But their hostile disputes came to the attention of my grandfather on my father's side, who worked as the neighborhood

*barber*¹¹. *Barbers* talk to their clients as they work, after all, and he was often privy to the neighborhood news and gossip.

In a rage, Grandpop marched into my parents' house. They lived in the neighborhood, so he had been worried about me for a long time. And then, he let them have it.

"I knew you two were having problems, and I don't blame you for divorcing. But it's inexcusable to let an innocent child get caught in the middle. From this day on, I have no son, nor daughter-in-law. We'll take Daichi in. As for you two, go run off to your lovers and get out of here!"

My parents happily divorced.

And I was raised by my Grandpop the *barber*.

I didn't feel sad as he led me away and took me home. I guess I had some vague feeling that Grandpop would treat me better than my parents. Until then, if my mother was out at night with her lover, I would be lucky if she left me a cup of instant ramen for dinner--it wasn't like my father would take any notice of me, after all.

Let me tell you, I got good at cleaning up after myself when I wet the bed or something else like that. Since most days there was no one around to hear me cry, I had no choice but to clean it up myself. (laugh)

My school entrance ceremony was in a month, but I didn't even have a *randoseru* yet. All I thought--I was so calculating!--all I thought was that Grandpop would be practical and take care of it, and I was glad. I wasn't a very nice kid. (laugh)

I made more friends after I went to live at my grandfather's. Grandpop's *barbershop* was pretty community-oriented. Customers would bring their children or grandchildren along when they came to get their hair cut. And Grandpop would tell them to play with me. I had already finished kindergarten, but due to my home environment I was a gloomy kid and I didn't make one friend there.

¹¹ One of the hardest things about being a translator is that sometimes there is no word in the target language with the same connotation as the one you're trying to translate. As a not-so-random example, take the word *tokoya*. It's a common word that literally means "barber" or "barbershop," but it has the same slightly sleazy connotation that "massage parlor" has in English (though this is due more to an accident of kanji than any historical association of barbershops with brothels). Since the word *tokoya* is going to come up several times in this chapter, and there is no common English word for "a person who cuts hair" that has a sleazy connotation, I've decided to mark its occurrence by using italics. So whenever you see "*barber*" or "*barbershop*" in italics, remember to think slightly dirty thoughts.

I think that was the first time I learned how to play, and how to fight with other kids.

Oh yeah, *barbershops* always have magazines and newspapers laying around for customers to read while they wait, right? Well, Grandpop's *barbershop* always had *New World Weekly* too. Just thought I'd do some sucking up here. (laugh)

Grandpop was really the one who made me into a human being. My parents turned their backs on me before I could even remember, so they never bothered with the kind of teaching or discipline that turns a kid into a real person.

Sure, my parents taught me how to read and tell time--because they would have lost face if I had shown up to kindergarten not knowing those things. But since I happened to be a quiet kid by nature, they otherwise left me alone. If I was quiet in front other people, I couldn't embarrass them, they thought.

But it wasn't that I was well-behaved; there was just nothing inside me. I was empty. There was nothing resembling humanity within my heart.

That first day when Grandpop took me back to his *barbershop*, he gave me some food. It was a flounder simmered in soy sauce that Grandma had made. My coming to them was a sudden thing, so she hadn't had time to prepare anything more to kid's liking; it was just the day's leftovers.

At the time, fish wasn't my favorite food, and so I rudely announced, "I hate fish," and tried to make for the room I always watched TV in.

And then Grandpop grabbed me by the nape of the neck and smacked me.

It surprised me! My parents had no interest in me and just left me alone, so I had never been hit. And Grandpop had never been anything but kind to me before that.

Out of shock, and pain, I started crying. And then on top of that, Grandpop started yelling at me in a voice like thunder.

"Your grandmother went to the trouble to heat that up for you! Without even touching it with your chopsticks, how can you have the nerve to say you don't like it?!"

By that point I was bawling and digging my heels in. Grandma tried to intervene for me, but Grandpop had a bit of the old-fashioned spirit in him, and he refused to listen.

"Up until now you've been our grandson, so I've been lenient, but that all changes today! You're *our* child now! If you misbehave, you're going to get a good scolding, and maybe a good thumping too! Do you understand me!?"

As he shouted at me, he plunked me down at the low table, made me sit *seiza*, and after I said, "*Itadakimasu*¹²," made me eat until the plate was clean. When I had finished with "*Gochisousama*¹³," he made me clear the table.

This might surprise you, but I hadn't been taught to say *itadakimasu* or *gochisousama*. We all said them together in kindergarten, but since I didn't know what they meant, I just bowed my head with everyone else did and didn't say anything.

As I ate, tears dripping down my cheeks, Grandpop treated me to another long lecture. (laugh)

"Listen to me. That fish and rice will become your blood and muscle, and keep you alive. For you to live, other living things have to die. That holds just as true for those hamburgers and croquettes you like as it does for that fish you're eating now. Because we humbly receive other lives to sustain our own, we say '*itadakimasu*' and '*gochisousama*.' Do you understand me?"

At the time I thought he was long-winded and annoying, but now I'm grateful for what he taught me.

...However, it turned out people of my grandparents' age didn't understand things like food allergies very well. Only later did they buy some books and discover that I had had some of the signs. (laugh) Grandma went to talks at the health center, and listened to the young mothers who lived in our neighborhood.

Thankfully, I don't have many allergies, but remembering the way my grandparents worked so hard at raising me makes me feel truly grateful.

They helped me with studying too--they taught me how to read and write a lot of kanji. Unfortunately, since they were from an older generation, sometimes they accidentally taught me the old forms of

¹² Literally, "I humbly receive [this food]." A ritual expression of gratitude before meals.

¹³ Literally, "It was a feast." A ritual expression of gratitude after meals.

the characters¹⁴. (laugh) It kept me from getting a hundred percent on a few kanji tests.

Oh, but these days I get a lot of compliments on TV and movies sets. People tell me I can read kanji well for someone so young.

When my grades slipped, they would send me to remedial lessons. Apparently calculus was a little beyond the abilities of people over sixty. (laugh)

When I think about what would have happened to me without Grandpop and Grandma, I shiver. While my parents were raising me, I was quiet, but that's all. I was an empty shell in the shape of a child, and because I was quiet, I was easy to ignore.

I have a feeling that if one of my parents had taken me, that shell would have become packed with things no person should have inside of them, and I would have grown up to be someone who looked human, but wasn't human at all.

At the very least, I wouldn't be where I am today. I might have done something that turned me into one of those people you see on TV, with coats pulled up over their heads to hide their faces¹⁵. I might have been dead before I reached adulthood.

I believe Grandpop and Grandma made me a human being. Kousaka Daichi might be praised as an actor, but they laid the foundation that allowed me to become who I am today.

I am truly, deeply grateful.

I only hope that appearing in a special edition of *New World*, which Grandpop has subscribed to for decades, will help repay that debt just a little. (laugh)

*

A loud sniffing noise came from beside Orikuchi--it was her assistant. For a fan who had tagged along just for the chance to meet Kousaka Daichi, the story that Orikuchi had coaxed out of him had apparently been too intense to bear.

¹⁴ Japanese kanji went through a simplification of its own right after World War II, though less drastic than the Chinese one. An older generation, therefore, might be more familiar with the pre-simplified versions of these characters. Assuming that Kousaka is 20, and his grandfather was 60 when he took him in at age 5, that puts his birth year at about 1945. So he should have been taught the correct forms in school...but maybe he learned the older forms from books that were published pre-simplification?

¹⁵ I believe this refers to the practice of hiding the identity of criminals from news cameras by hiding their faces with their coats.

"I'm sorry, could she borrow your washroom?" Orikuchi asked. The manager consented, and the assistant stood and left, making her apologies.

"I'm sorry about her reaction. She's young, after all, and she must have become too caught up in Kousaka-san's story."

"No, I'm the one who should be apologizing. Now do you understand why my agency suppressed the story until now?" Kousaka said lightly, then added, "Please tell her not to worry about it."

It was probably thanks to the "Grandpop" and "Grandma" he had talked about in the interview that he had the good manners and presence of mind to make such a request.

Another reporter was in charge of investigating why he had decided to become an actor, so Orikuchi's work was almost done.

"I'd like to confirm one thing with you..."

"Yes?" Kousaka replied, smiling.

Orikuchi didn't beat around the bush. "If we publish this interview as-is, your parents will look like monsters. Are you alright with that?"

"Perfectly." Kousaka's smile didn't slip by an inch. "I'm ashamed to say this, but I've been told that a man and a woman calling themselves my parents have each been trying to call my agency and my grandparents' shop."

His smile and his words all pointed to one word: *punishment*. He wasn't the mild young man he appeared to be, after all. He was quite a force to be reckoned with.

His story would also preempt any attempt to sell their story as Kousaka Daichi's parents to some third-rate gossip rag.

Expose yourselves as my parents and enjoy the censure of the world, was the message.

"I'm looking forward to the article. I hope it'll be good."

"Of course."

Her assistant returned at this point, and all that was left was the photography.

Kousaka, naturally, knew how to produce all the right expressions at all the right times, but Orikuchi still regretted that she hadn't been able to get a shot of his face when he mentioned his "Grandpop" for the first time.

"What!? Orikuchi-san interviewed Kousaka Daichi!?" cried Shibasaki. As usual, she had come to the Task Force office on some pretext. "Why didn't you tell us before!?" she wailed in disappointment.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Genda asked bluntly. "How many celebrities do you think she interviews? You want me to remember 'em all so I can tell you first?"

"You told us now, didn't you!?"

"I remembered only because he happened to show up on TV!" Genda pointed at the old television that was sitting in the lounge area of the office. Kousaka Daichi had appeared in a commercial, and Genda had said, "*Oh, Orikuchi's meeting that guy today.*"

"Ohhhhh, if only you had told me beforehaaaaaaand!"

Shibasaki collapsed on the table in exaggerated dismay, provoking Iku to ask, "Shibasaki, are you that big a fan of Kousaka Daichi? It's the first I've heard of it."

Shibasaki popped back up. "Hello, it's Kousaka Daichi!? If I had been able to ask her to get his autograph, do you *know* how much I could sell it for!? Or I could put it up for auction and watch the price go up by the second!"

"Shibasaki, ladies and gentlemen," Tedzuka said drily, shrugging his shoulders. Their superiors laughed, but for some reason, Tedzuka's knowing expression wasn't funny to Iku.

What the hell. Shibasaki's closest friend is ME. In spite of that, she had failed to foresee the direction Shibasaki's greedy instincts would take.

Well, whatever. If she's also friends with Tedzuka, she's also friends with Tedzuka, she thought, perking up.

Iku then asked Genda, "So Kousaka Daichi's gonna appear in *New World*? That'll give his career a big boost." These were the honest feelings of someone from the same generation. The magazine didn't write about young actors or pop idols very often.

"What, are you a fan of his too?" Doujou asked.

"If a woman is hounded by a demon instructor all day, I bet she likes to relax by watching TV shows with nice guys in them," Komaki teased, entering the conversation.

Objections to this came from all sides.

"There wasn't any specific motive behind the question! I was just surprised to find that she could be just as starstruck as the next girl!"

"I'm not starstruck! I wouldn't call myself a fan of his, I've just noticed that the shows and movies he's been in have all been pretty good! I'm like, 'oh, I guess he's talented,' but that's it!"

"That's not what I meant. Your usual behavior just made me worry about whether or not you had a normal young woman's sensibilities."

"You're the *last* person I want to hear that from, you pigheaded founding member of the Bear-Killer Society!"

"Hey, you've got an extra word there, you freewheeling second member of the Bear-Killer Society!"

That was where Genda stopped their quarrel before it escalated even further.

"You two. Do you want to hear about Orikuchi's work, or not?"

Both of them shrunk a little, and Iku, who had asked the question in the first place, replied, "Yes, please."

"Huh, Sesousha's putting out a special issue?..." Komaki murmured, looking surprised. "Well, it should sell. He's popular with a lot of women. Even students might work hard to try and buy it."

Komaki probably wouldn't have been able to supply this analysis if he didn't have a girlfriend who had just graduated from high school the other day. Though, Komaki's girlfriend Marié was already nineteen, due to some troubles in middle school.

"Those who can't might try to walk off with or cut out parts of the library's copy. We should beef up security after it's delivered," Tedzuka said. His tone was casual, but Iku winced anyway. His words dredged up a bitter memory from her training period two years ago. She had announced the capture of a magazine vandal without actually securing him, and Doujou had been injured.

She grew dejected as she brooded over the memory, and her head drooped. Then someone next to her bopped her on the head; the lightly curled fingers belonged to Doujou. He didn't look at her. Was he telling her "don't worry about it" or "pay attention"? *Probably the latter*, she thought, sitting up straighter.

"It might be a good idea to let the bookstores know too," Doujou added, as if the exchange had never happened. It was probably only because she was still confused about Doujou that she had interpreted his actions as kindness.

"I'll go make some recommendations to the Administrative Division too!" Shibasaki said, and left. Perhaps she was worried about

the time, seeing as how she spent so much of it popping up here and there around the library.

Since no one else had asked the question yet, Iku said, "What format is the special issue going to be in?"

Genda looked like he was racking his memory. "It sounded like the goal was to make it as profitable as possible, since the constant censorship cuts into their bottom line."

According to what Genda had heard, the special issue was being published in order to mitigate the losses caused by censorship and shoplifting. It would be a *mook*, totally scrubbed of any objectionable language, and printed in great quantity. They wanted to keep the price under 3,000 yen.

"That's pretty cheap--a photo-only issue went for that much before the Media Improvement Act was passed," Komaki said, instantly ready with an example in the same price range.

"Three thousand yen is within the reach of a teenager's allowance, after all," Doujou nodded. "It's also cheap enough that we don't need to be overzealous about guarding our copy."

"Our copy will have the library's stamp somewhere on it anyway!" Iku said. She expected her meaning to be obvious, but it didn't seem to have gotten through to the men. She shrunk a little under those four identical looks of puzzlement. "Um, I think someone who's really Kousaka Daichi's fan wouldn't steal the library's copy. The girls I knew in school who were pop idol fans, they were kind of like collectors. When they were buying merchandise, they were really obsessive about finding ones without any dirt or damage. --Not that the library seal is dirt or damage!" she added hastily. "But if it's cheap enough to buy with their allowance, I think they'd want a brand-new copy instead of one with the library's stamp on it. You wouldn't be able to resell it to a fan for the same reason. So there's no reason to steal the library's copy."

"Wow, are girls really like that?"

Since it was Komaki who asked it, Iku replied cautiously, thinking he might be teasing her. "If they truly like him, yeah. If you really like someone, don't you want to get your hands on everything that has to do with them, through honest means?"

Doujou abruptly looked away from Iku, turning his eyes to Komaki instead. After glancing at him, Komaki looked back to Iku. "Sometimes Kasahara-san is such a good little angel that you just want to hug her, you know?"

"Excuse me!?"

Iku wasn't the only one who reacted to this dubious compliment; Tedzuka jolted, while Genda grinned broadly.

"Wait, no no no, don't say that, Instructor Komaki, Marié-chan's gonna kill me! Or--is this some kind of trap!? Are you trying to trick me into something!?"

"No, no! I'm stating the general opinion. If only everyone in the world was like you--no bookseller would ever fear shoplifting again."

"But it would be a pretty terrifying world in other ways," Tedzuka quipped.

Doujou cleared his throat. "*Anyway*, there are still an endless number of people who will want to get their hands on the issue by any means necessary, however much they 'truly like him.' Though perhaps those kind of people don't 'truly like him' after all. We'll get in touch with bookstores quietly and ask about the real chances of the issue being shoplifted. If it looks likely, then we'll know that the library needs to be extra vigilant too."

Doujou was disgustingly serious throughout this whole speech, and the conversation that had practically turned into a meeting ended there.

*

It was around the time that proofreading of all the articles was nearly complete that the plans for Kousaka Daichi's special issue ran aground.

An order to delay publishing came from Kousaka through his agency. The headstrong order indicated that he was also considering blocking publishing altogether.

The editorial department of *New World* was in an astonished uproar at the news. A message was sent back requesting a meeting to explain the problem, but this resulted in a heated back-and-forth for a while.

For the time being, Sesousha announced that the issue would be delayed, and the legal department was just drafting an explanation that would be sent out to subscribers and those who had pre-ordered, when Kousaka Daichi's agency finally agreed to a meeting.

The ones who had been summoned were Orikuchi and the assistant who had accompanied her. So dragging along her nervous assistant, Orikuchi made her second visit to Kousaka's agency.

Ever since the order to delay publishing had come, every reporter who had worked on the issue had been uneasily wondering whether it was *their* article that was the problem.

Each of them imagined the cold treatment they would get if it turned out that their article was responsible for sabotaging an issue that would actually make the magazine a lot of money for once. They didn't know which article had touched a nerve with Kousaka or his agency. It goes without saying that the editorial department was trying to figure that out. But each of those reporters was also going over their articles--as well as all the others--with a fine-tooth comb searching for defects.

When the summons came with Orikuchi's name on it, sympathy was the second emotion that permeated the editorial department--relief was the first. *Thank god it wasn't my article.*

As for Orikuchi, it would be a lie to say that it didn't hurt her pride to find herself on the chopping block. She thought she had written a good article. She thought she had listened carefully to Kousaka's unpretentious narrative and respected it when she wrote her story.

They met again in the same building, in the same room. The only thing different was Kousaka's expression. The mild-mannered young man from the other day was perhaps his business persona.

The others didn't stand and greet them; the manager merely pointed silently to their chairs. Just this chilly reception alone had her assistant close to tears.

Orikuchi bowed and sat down across from Kousaka, letting her assistant sit across from the manager. Orikuchi knew from interviewing him that he wasn't the type to let other people do his talking for him. In which case, his manager and her assistant were nothing but witnesses to what had happened before.

"This is quite a disappointment for me," Kousaka began. "Yours was the article I was most looking forward to."

"...Did it not meet with your expectations?"

Instead of answering, Kousaka handed her a stack of papers that had been sitting on the edge of the table. It was the galley proof of her article.

At the top was a picture of a smiling Kousaka, with the caption, "My Savior was my Grandpop the Hairdresser." Because it was her own article, she remembered every word. She had kept interview questions to a minimum, instead letting the reader hear Kousaka reminisce as if

he were speaking directly to them. That way made Kousaka's story come alive and his personality shine through.

To be fair, most of the interview itself had been Kousaka reminiscing. She had broken it down so that it was easier for a reader to understand, and added a few explanations here and there, but fundamentally, she didn't remember fabricating anything or adding anything unnecessary.

She thought it had turned out to be a pretty good article, if she did say so herself.

"I have no complaints about the content. I know I have a tendency to be gloomy and self-deprecating about my upbringing, and I think you did a fantastic job taking the story I told and turning it into just a reminiscence about something that happened long ago. In that way, it exceeded my expectations."

So he knew what Orikuchi had been aiming for, and he thought she had hit the mark.

In that case-- Orikuchi thought suddenly, wrinkling her brow a little. Kousaka's objection must be more subtle and more complicated.

Sure enough, Kousaka raised just the complaint she had worried about.

"What is the word 'hairstylist' doing in the caption? And what is the word 'stylist' doing in the article?"

Orikuchi had no answer for him. She look down at her lap.

It was the only possible objection left.

"I said, 'my Grandpop the *barber*.' From the beginning, all the way through to the end. I don't remember ever saying 'hairstylist' or 'stylist' or anything like that."

"Oh! Well, that's--" her assistant piped up helpfully.

"Hush!" Orikuchi scolded her, but her assistant, as a fan of Kousaka's, desperately wanted to clear up his misunderstanding, and ignored her warning.

"The word *barber* would be censored by the Media Improvement Act! Because it's a forbidden word, if you don't replace it with more appropriate words like 'hairstyling' or 'hairstyling' in broadcast or print, you get censored and your magazine gets seized! As for 'stylist,' I think during proofreading they decided to use it because it's a good conversational word!"

"Excuse me."

Kousaka's tone was lethal. It was too much for the assistant, who swallowed the rest of her words.

"My Grandpop is close to retiring, but he just turned 75, and counting his training period he's been a *barber* for more than 60 years, and he's always called himself a *barber*. How am I supposed to explain this article to someone who's been a *barber* for over 60 years? You want me to say, '*Barber* is an unprintable word, so they replaced it with something else, but don't worry about it'? You want me to say that to my Grandpop, who has 60 years of experience and pride and attachment to being a *barber*!?"

Her assistant, who had set off this land mine, had no reply for this. She shook like a leaf as tears dripped from her eyes.

"And who the hell decides what words are 'forbidden'? Whatever bastard decided, without telling my Grandpop, that *barber* is a dirty word, bring him here and let him say it to my face!"

He banged his fist down on the table, and her assistant began to wail like a baby.

"Leave," Orikuchi told her firmly. She fled the room. The girl had joined the company as an aspiring editor; Orikuchi decided she would be informing HR that she wasn't cut out for the job.

"...To answer your question about the criteria for forbidden words," she continued as calmly as possible, "before the Media Improvement Act was passed, there were tacit restrictions on all news companies on the words that could be said during a broadcast. Additionally, every company had their own criteria for forbidden words, and followed them. However, restrictions on speech were not as severe as they are now, so there were almost no problems with using mildly taboo words in print. I believe things were more strict in broadcasting."

Orikuchi had been in upper elementary school when the Media Improvement Act was passed. For a few years before that, there had been an increasing number of apologies for "inappropriate language" after news shows and the like, especially for the names of occupations¹⁶.

The apologies actually legitimized discrimination against followers of those professions in the minds of children instead of decreasing it. They teased and tormented one girl, whose family's shop had had a

¹⁶ I'm having trouble finding documentation for this in English, but I believe that a lot of Japanese occupations were renamed somewhat recently to be more politically correct. I remember when we got to the "occupations" chapter in my Japanese book, my sensei made us cross out a few of the vocabulary words and replace them with the more "acceptable" versions.

sign reading "*Fishmonger*¹⁷" for the last three generations. Thus it often happened that attempts to curb discrimination were distorted until they had the exact opposite effect.

The girl whose family had been *fishmongers* for three generations was a friend of Orikuchi's, and the sign in question had a venerable history--it had been hand-lettered by a relative of her great-grandfather's. But in time, it was replaced with one that read "Fish Market," because of the amount of teasing the girl endured at school thanks to the frequent apologies on television. Her parents had replaced it out of love for their daughter.

"*E-Even though we liked great-granddad's sign better,*" her friend had sobbed, hugging her knees. Next to her, Orikuchi had sat too, hugging her knees in silence.

Some time after that, the Media Improvement Act was passed by the National Diet. Orikuchi moved away due to another one of her father's frequent job transfers, and not a trace of her provincial accent remained today.

Kousaka's "*barbershop*" was a victim of the same distortion. And Kousaka himself probably felt more indignation over that distortion than his grandfather.

Why would some stranger turn my proud grandfather's title into an insult? The way his own words had been revised in Orikuchi's article only made it worse. He probably found that difficult to forgive.

And Orikuchi herself, who had let the revision stand, had ultimately forgotten about its twisted basis. She had let the Media Improvement Act tame her like a wild horse.

But she couldn't wallow in self-reproof. As an employee she had a responsibility to represent her company's interests to Kousaka.

"Will you allow me to explain why our company did what it did?"

Kousaka didn't answer. Taking his silence for assent, she continued.

"I too think the Media Improvement Committee's basis for considering the word '*barbershop*' taboo is ridiculous. I once had an old friend whose family were *fishmongers*, who had to replace a fine old sign that had been hanging above their shop for three generations with one that used the more 'appropriate' term 'Fish Market,' for reasons related to censorship. I still remember my friend crying as she told me that they had liked the old sign better."

¹⁷ Just like before, I have italicized this word to indicate that it is less politically correct. In English, fishmonger is an old but not offensive word for someone who sells fish.

Kousaka's expression lightened. Orikuchi silently thanked her old friend, whose face she could no longer even remember. To reach Kousaka, she was willing to use whatever she had, including her own painful memories.

That was her job.

"But practically speaking, the fact that '*barbershop*' is on the Improvement Committee's list of taboo words is a real problem. It may not be high on their priority list, but we are Sesousha. We're on the front lines in the media's battle against the Media Improvement Committee. The Improvement Committee censors us particularly harshly, trying to make an example of us."

The plan for Kousaka's special issue was a large print run sold at a low cost. This was partly to make it more profitable for Sesousha, but also to make it as easy as possible for members of Kousaka's wide fanbase to get their hands on it. Kousaka would have agreed to this part of the plan as well.

"Kousaka-san, if we put any forbidden words in your special issue, no matter how low-priority they may be, I guarantee it will be targeted. The Improvement Special Agency will hunt down your book. That wouldn't be your fault; they would be trying to teach us a lesson. But if that happened, our plan for selling a large number of cheaply-priced copies would fall apart. In order to protect our investment, we would have to print few copies and sell them at a high price. We wouldn't be able to realize our goal of widely distributing it through your whole fanbase."

If the issue had a forbidden word in it, she estimated the price would end up over 10,000 yen. No one would buy a *mook* at that price; they would have to change the binding and put it out as a photobook.

She didn't want to say this, but--

"...We'd also have to think about publishing it in a form that would leave some of your younger fans unable to buy it."

Kousaka squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, looking pained. For a man who cared a lot about his fans, this was a blow indeed.

But--

"...Nevertheless, this is non-negotiable."

Here, his manager cut in.

"I'm sure we would all like to discuss these matters with our respective companies, so let's end here for today. Seeing that the issue has already been announced, any publishing delays reflect on

Kousaka as well, so we'll definitely be meeting with Sesousha again to see if we can't hammer out a compromise."

Since he had effectively ended the discussion, Orikuchi stood. As she tried to make her bows and leave, Kousaka addressed her, sounding a little lost.

"After my grandfather took me in, I was made fun of, but not for being raised by a '*barber*.' Not because of the word itself. Because I smelled different. Children of *barbers* smell different from other kids. Like shampoo or conditioner or shaving cream. It's a distinctively clean smell. That tiny difference bothered them, so they picked on me--kids have simple reasons like that. But to make '*barber*' a disrespectful word is like putting a stamp of approval on that teasing."

"I understand."

"When my grandfather heard that *New World* was putting out a special issue about me, he was over the moon. However much visibility I have from television dramas or movies, it seems it's special when a magazine he's familiar with does a piece on me. --So I would very much like to find a compromise that works for both of us."

"Of course. So do I."

Orikuchi bowed, smiling, and left the room.

*

The cherry trees planted around the library were just beginning to leaf out when Orikuchi came to visit Genda.

"Orikuchi-san!" Iku was the first person to see Orikuchi when she entered the office. She bubbled, "I heard all about how you're putting together an issue on Kousaka Daichi! When's it coming out?"

"Heck if I know," Orikuchi answered absently. "Iku-chan, would you be a dear and bring me some tea? Brewed strong and bitter. And something sweet if you have it," she added brazenly, heading straight for the commander's office, where Genda was.

As Iku rose to make the tea, she lowered her voice and asked her superiors, "I wonder what happened?"

"It's probably because she doesn't have anywhere to be right now," Doujou answered cryptically.

Komaki, sensing she wouldn't understand, added for her benefit, "She stops by for moral support, or to kill time. Today it looks like the former."

The words "moral support" told her something about their relationship, which she still didn't quite understand. "Mmm," Iku nodded, heading for the sink.

Wagashi would go well with bitter tea, she thought to herself, but there were only cookies left in the tin. She stacked them on a serving plate anyway and went to offer them to Orikuchi.

The door to the commander's office was ajar, so she didn't knock, only called out "Pardon me!" before entering. She found Orikuchi sprawled out lazily across the sofa, nestling into the cushions, and let out a gasp. "Orikuchi-san, um, that's not very, um, ladylike, perhaps you should...I mean, some of the guys here are a bit young..."

"It makes me so happy that you'd get all flustered for me, even at my age."

Clearly whatever Orikuchi was upset about, it wasn't trivial.

Man, what is going on here? Iku wondered, discreetly setting the tea tray down on the table. *Maybe I should close the door...*

Just then Genda, who had been going through a stack of papers that just needed his seal, stamped the last one.

"Kasahara, get Doujou and the others in here. If we don't let her vent during our break, she's liable to lounge around here all day."

Everyone brought their cups into the commander's office for their break, which of course began with Orikuchi venting.

"...so because of all that, we still haven't been able to find a way to compromise."

"Well, that's certainly..." Komaki started, still choosing his words, "...a complicated situation," he finished.

Kousaka Daichi still maintained that replacing the word that he had used during the interview, '*barber*,' amounted to misreporting his words. And Sesousha maintained that if they couldn't put out a large number of cheap copies of the issue and make a big profit, there was no point in putting out the issue at all.

"But Kousaka Daichi seems like a decent guy," Iku said, "...if a pain in the neck for you guys," she added with a grin. "He really loves and respects his Grandpop and Grandma. That story kinda makes *me* want to become his fan."

Tedzuka turned his head to look at her incredulously. "Geez, learn to be a little more sensitive," he shot back. "We're supposed to be listening to her vent right now."

"Huh? But..."

Orikuchi stopped Iku before she could really get pouty. "No, it's fine, if it weren't for all the money my company would lose, I would be on Kousaka-kun's side too. But it's impossible for someone in my position."

She could tell from Orikuchi's expression. They had put together a good issue.

"We could talk all we wanted about eliminating all unprintable words to avoid being censored, but in the end, asking an ordinary person to know and understand all those rules is futile. Kousaka didn't even know that '*barber*' was an unprintable word until we told him. I think that infuriated him."

There were a few hundred words that the Media Improvement Committee designated as forbidden, ranked from minor to major. New words were appended to that list annually and new guidelines were put out every year. One could not help but think that the Committee was making the guidelines narrower and narrower just so that they could create more reasons to go after publishers and broadcasters.

And Kousaka had suddenly found himself tossed in the middle of all that selfish, baseless sanctimony. No wonder he was so indignant for his "*barber*" grandfather's sake.

"But I have nothing to be proud of." Orikuchi put both elbows on the table and lowered her forehead to rest on her crossed wrists. "Until we went to see him, I had no idea why he was so upset. I didn't think it was such a big deal to change '*barber*' to 'hairstylist' or 'stylist.' So I let those edits stay in."

"There...there was nothing else you could do," Doujou said in a consoling tone. "You're trying to make a profit, and meanwhile the Improvement Committee is always trying to trip you up. If a just a little slip of the tongue is enough to provoke censorship, then anyone would do what you did. In today's media world, you didn't have a choice."

"Thanks. But..." Orikuchi gave them the saddest smile they had ever seen. "In the course of my crusade against the Improvement Committee, I'm afraid that I've forgotten how to interview people. That kid was freaking *glowing* while he was talking to me, and even then I botched it."

"Orikuchi-san..."

Iku was about to lay a sympathetic hand on Orikuchi's shoulder--

When Genda, who had been silent the whole time, spoke up. "Don't come all the way to someone else's pad if all you're going to do is get all weepy," he chided her. "It's not like you!"

"This is the Kantou Library Base. Please don't call it our 'pad,'" Doujou protested immediately.

Ignoring him, Genda boomed out in a deep voice, "From the way it's taking you so long to find a compromise, it's plain that neither of you want to give up the original plan! That means you still have some fight in you; there must be some weakness you can find and exploit. You didn't just come to us, the natural enemy of the Improvement Committee, to be listened to and coddled, did you? If so, get outta here now!"

"Commander, maybe you shouldn't--" Under the circumstances, Iku tried to defend her as another woman. But Orikuchi turned to face Genda, almost as if to distance herself from Iku's protection.

"...you got any ideas?" she snapped, denying the need for another person's intervention or consolation.

Iku carefully withdrew her comforting hand and returned to her seat. "Now that was sensitive," Doujou commended her, with a hint of a smile in his voice.

That night in their room, she told the story to Shibasaki.

"That commander of yours is at it again! I swear, he loves to think up insane, gratuitous solutions to other people's problems," she moaned, rubbing her temple mournfully.

*

Who would back down first? Or, if there was a compromise to be found, what could it be?

That was where their discussions always started, and both Sesousha and Kousaka's agency were thoroughly sick of it by now. A sense of fatigue blanketed the conference room that day before the meeting even started. This time, it was being held at Sesousha's offices.

"I have a proposal."

Before the meeting could embark upon its usual trajectory, with Kousaka's agency being stubborn and Sesousha being conciliatory, Orikuchi raised her hand.

"Go ahead, Orikuchi."

She looked into the eyes of each member of the agency one by one. She saved Kousaka for last.

"Why don't you sue Sesousha?"

You gotta play that move like you're throwing a grenade into an enemy trench. If you spend too long trickling out an explanation, their common sense'll quash it before they even give it a good look. Get it out there all at once, and take advantage of the confusion to push your case.

Just as Genda had predicted, the room erupted into loud buzzing like a hive of agitated bees. Naturally, Orikuchi hadn't revealed her plan to her Sesousha coworkers either.

"File a lawsuit claiming that we are misreporting your client's words in an interview article in a way he finds unacceptable, and insist that the original word--i.e. '*barber*'--be restored."

"Now hold on just a minute, Orikuchi-kun!" "Just what the hell kind of..."

As pandemonium swirled around them, Orikuchi kept her eyes fixed on Kousaka. And Kousaka was--
--hooked, line and sinker!

A sudden bright sparkle illuminated his glazed-over eyes, urging her to continue.

"And we'll counterclaim. We'll say we were right to replace '*barber*' with a more tasteful word during proofreading, because it's been declared unprintable by the Media Improvement Committee."

"If we do that, we'll be the target of every media outlet in the country!"

"That," Orikuchi said, "is the whole point. Inquiries from all the media outlets will be pouring in to Kousaka-san's agency. Kousaka-san, as a top-class young actor, is such a media darling that no news agency will dare twist his words or attack him. And indeed, they won't be against Sesousha either; they'll be attacking the Media Improvement Act for biting us in the ass once again. In the guise of coming to Kousaka-san's defense, they can criticize the Improvement Act to their hearts' content. Sesousha will then put out a statement like 'we had no choice, we were just trying to follow the Media Improvement Act,' flanking from the other side. We should have plenty of public sympathy as well."

"What kind of legal settlement are you picturing, at the end?" the president of the agency asked her.

"I believe that, rather than monetary reparation or some other settlement that sidesteps the question of unprintable words, a settlement that allows the word *barber* to be legally used in Kousaka-san's special issue would result in the most mutual benefit for our two companies."

The Improvement Special Agency would jump at the chance to censor any issue put out by Sesousha, and triumphantly hunt it down for the most minor of the taboo words. But if such a decision were handed down by the courts, the issue would be out of the Agency's reach. Since there were no other objectionable phrases in the issue besides "*barber*," and since the plaintiff was actually from a *barbering* family, there was a slight chance that it would work. There were a few precedents involving other taboo phrases.

"And if our right to publish an issue with a taboo word was recognized, it would set a major legal precedent."

The higher-ups from both companies wore calculating expressions, as if they were mentally preparing themselves.

The only question was--

Orikuchi looked hard at Kousaka. The only question was, would Kousaka agree to a proposal that involved leading a large-scale campaign over the Media Improvement Committee's classification of *barber* as an unprintable word? He seemed interested in the proposal itself, but would Kousaka want his grandfather to know about it?

"...Let's do it. I prefer a forthright approach over fruitless search for a fake compromise. So does my grandfather. I'm sure of it."

And thus it was decided.

The president of Sesousha shook hands with the president of Kousaka's agency. "Looks like this'll turn into an exhibition match for our legal departments." They exchanged cocksure grins.

The legal departments of each company would take over refining the plan for the lawsuit, so the meeting broke up there. On her way out, Orikuchi was stopped by Kousaka.

"Who was it?" he asked.

Orikuchi lowered her brows in confusion at the sudden question.

Kousaka gave her a sly smile. "Who came up with that proposal? It wasn't you, was it."

While she was still at a loss for an answer, Kousaka continued.

"Despite what I look like, I *am* an actor. While you were making your case, you looked like someone who was putting all her faith in someone else."

The sudden realization of how much she had been relying on that man struck her speechless.

"Let me meet whoever it was. Please. I'm making it part of the deal."

"...why?" she asked, still feeling awkward.

Kousaka didn't seem to mind. "Simple curiosity. I'm interested in meeting the person who would come up with such an absurd idea. And the person that someone as capable as you goes to for help."

There was also probably some professional curiosity involved. Making character studies was an actor's destiny.

"Fine with me, but...I don't think he's the kind of man you'll ever end up playing."

*

The entire media world sat up and took notice when Kousaka Daichi's agency, Office Turn, sued Sesousha in a district court.

During an interview I was asked about my relatives, and I talked about the *barber* who raised me. But in the resulting article, every time I used "*barber*," it was replaced with "hairdresser" or "stylist" instead.

When I asked why, they told me that *barber* had been designated unprintable by the Media Improvement Committee.

Apparently it's a "slightly discriminatory" word that "should be used with caution." *Fishmonger* and *greengrocer* are in the same category.

My first thought was "The nerve!" *Barber* was the label that I was intimately familiar with. The fact that some anonymous person had decided on their own that it was discriminatory made my blood boil. I almost never get that angry.

It seems like that would be rare, for someone who gives such a serene impression.

Right? Sure, it's an old word at this point, but there are still plenty of shops whose signs say "*Barber*"--my family's is one of them, as you might expect. When you talk about a union meeting, you say, "at the *barber's* union..." To challenge that by calling the word "discriminatory" or "taboo"--now *that* is rude. *That* is discrimination.

Stylists, hairdressers, whatever you call it--they all do the exact same thing. They cut a customer's hair, shave them, clean them up, and send them on their way. My family has been doing it for many years, with a sense of professional pride. I just don't understand why "stylist" and "hairdresser" pass but "*barber*" doesn't.

As someone from a family of *barbers*, let me say that it seems to me like someone was specifically *trying* to interpret *barber* in a discriminatory way, and then drew a line around it. The people who decided might have thought they were being considerate, for which I thank them, but just who do they think they are? I want to say to them, "You're the ones who are being discriminatory!" Not that I know who "they" are. (pained smile)

I don't want to be made to feel ashamed of the fact that we've been hanging out a sign that says "*Barber*" all these years, and I don't want my family to either.

But because of the Media Improvement Committee's censorship, Sesousha won't budge.

--In spite of the fact that when we agreed to work together on this special volume, my agency put a clause in the contract that forbids altering or falsifying my statements.

We called meeting after meeting, but we were never able to reach an agreement. Regretfully, it's come to this.

(Statement by Kousaka Daichi)

Seshousha, not to be outdone, released a counter-statement aimed at Office Turn--or rather, Kousaka Daichi.

This is terribly unfortunate.

When we first approached Office Turn with the plan for the special issue, we spent a long time hammering out the details. We were both committed to bringing the story of

Kousaka-san's life to as many of his fans as possible. Because his fanbase is so broad, we wanted to target a price range that would make it as easy as possible for his fans to obtain it--and to that end, it was planned from the beginning that we would be producing a big print run.

At the time, I thought it was obvious that to do that, the content would need to be able to pass through the Media Improvement Committee's censorship gauntlet without any trouble.

But what about Kousaka-san's statement that your contract forbids altering or falsifying his words?

I do think we made a mistake in not making absolutely sure we had the same expectations when we drew up the contract...but I think we share the blame for that one. I think everyone in the media business *should* know this, but when an issue is going have a large print run, it's almost taken for granted that unprintable words will be replaced with their more appropriate counterparts. Whether or not Kousaka-san knew this is one thing, but I simply cannot believe that Office Turn would not. It's not as if this is the first publication for one of their stars.

That being the case, I would like it if Office Turn would consider what would be an adult response in this situation. Of course, I believe that Kousaka-san's personal objections are pure and unselfish...

But the world doesn't turn on pure unselfishness?

To put it rather bluntly, yes. Especially for a publisher who is the sworn enemy of the censors, like us. Honestly, if we're the ones putting out somebody's issue, I'd like them to prepare themselves just a little for what it means to work with us.

Is it possible that the publishing contract itself will be revoked?

I really don't want to do that, if we can avoid it. On that point, we, Office Turn, and Kousaka-san are all in agreement. The issue itself is jam-packed with damn fine reporting. To throw it all away would be doing everyone a disservice, especially the readers who are waiting patiently for it. In spite of this lawsuit, I still hope that we can find a compromise we can both be happy with.

(Statement by Hisaki Tatsuo, president of Sesousha)

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"Goodness, they put it ahead of a story about a territorial waters dispute! It might be a slow news day, but still!" Shibasaki leaned toward the TV, sipping her tea. She was watching the news on NHK.

"Wasn't Kousaka-kun cast as the lead in NHK's Big River Drama, not this next season but the one after that? That's probably why."

But Kousaka's case had certainly attracted a lot of notice. Some news channels were carrying it as a top story, and it had also gotten a big write-up in the evening paper. The opportunity to sneak in some criticism of the Improvement Act was probably too delicious to resist. For booksellers and members of the Library Force, the sight of the media (who usually acted as if they had forgotten all about the Improvement Act) uniting in satirical criticism was laughable. Especially ridiculous was *Elucidate Weekly*, one of the other top weekly magazines.

"But still, if opposition to the Improvement Act increases thanks to Kousaka-kun, it's a good thing." As Iku refilled her cup with tea, Shibasaki brazenly pushed her mug over so that it stood next to Iku's. "Yeah, yeah," Iku said, moving to refill Shibasaki's as well.

"It's unintentionally turned into a negative campaign against the Improvement Act, with a popular actor leading the charge. We should be grateful for such good luck--campaigns like this cost a lot of money to run," Shibasaki said, almost sounding as though she had considering running such a campaign herself.

"A negative campaign, though, I dunno--remember when the Improvement Special Agency tried to entrap Instructor Komaki with that hearing business...?"

The Improvement Special Agency had tried to ensnare Komaki by exploiting his sweetheart Marié's disability, a vile and cowardly tactic. But their scheme had been smashed to pieces.

"This is a perfect illustration of that old saying 'You reap what you sow.' And what's more, the fact that the fight over the Improvement Act's taboo words is between Sesousha and Kousaka Daichi means the press coverage is going to be ten times as extensive. Wasn't that what Commander Genda was aiming for from the beginning?"

"*Yeah right!*" Iku started to say, then stopped. Genda might not look it, but he was actually quite the tactician. He was good at picking the time and place for a counter-attack--but he wasn't the type to think twice once he had.

It was indisputable that Genda had seen Orikuchi in her miserable state and given her a ludicrous, Genda-style way to solve her problem. But it was also highly possible that he had deftly incorporated his own revenge into the solution.

Iku was grateful that she had patrol duty the next day with Doujou; it gave her a chance to ask the question. It would have been hard to ask Komaki, since his ordeal was the motive behind the revenge.

"Yeah, I think he probably took that into consideration," Doujou agreed readily.

"Wow, is Commander Genda really the type to hold such an implacable grudge?"

"What the hell kind of idiot are you?" Doujou bopped Iku lightly on the head. It seemed to be his personal rule to always aim for the head when scolding people, even though he was handicapped by his short stature. She had discovered this a few days ago, when Tedzuka had made a rare mistake and been smacked on the head with a sheaf of rolled-up documents. "How could you think that for a minute? He wouldn't hold a grudge, he'd settle it right then and there, with violence. Obviously. No, this is a strategic measure, a strategic measure."

Iku cocked her head at him in confusion.

Doujou's voice took on a didactic tone. "Do you know why the Media Improvement Act was passed?"

"Ummm..." She had a feeling that a related topic had come up during her conversation with Tedzuka Satoshi. "Because not enough people cared?"

Doujou had been prepared to launch into an explanation, under the assumption that she wouldn't know; he gave her a surprised look instead. She had a feeling things might get awkward if she told him

she had heard it from Satoshi, so she put on her best innocent look and waited for Doujou to continue.

Doujou looked like he couldn't decide whether to praise her or not; in the end, he continued with an ambiguous compliment. "...Yeah, that's right. Most people weren't interested in what would happen if the media were more heavily restricted. It's the same reason why the Improvement Act hasn't been repealed to this day. Because few citizens are aware of the problems with putting restrictions on words, the Improvement Act remains on the books."

Since most television viewers didn't care whether a show's script used "*barber*" or "hairdresser," the media chose not to incorporate words that had heavy restrictions into their scripts.

The enforcers of the Improvement Act quietly hunted down words that viewers and readers wouldn't notice missing, and before anyone realized, they had moved on to bigger quarry than just individual words.

In the thirty years since it had been passed, the Media Improvement Act's supporters had obtained the power to hunt down that bigger quarry. First were "ideologies opposed to the Media Improvement Act" and "ideologies opposed to censorship." Even then, most people were indifferent, considering it someone else's problem. Many people also thought that ideologies so radical that they had to be hunted down could have nothing to do with them personally--even though their belief that the Act's enforcers would stop there was nothing but wishful thinking.

The Library Force, the sole organization that had the authority to oppose the censorship of the Media Improvement Act, had insisted for years that censorship was inherently unlawful, but that message hadn't reached people who didn't patronize the library. The weakness of the Library Force was its lack of PR power; no one paid it much attention outside of its disputes with the Improvement Special Agency.

The general public might be indifferent, but one group still viewed the Media Improvement Act and censorship with a sense of crisis: the tabloids and weekly magazines, which had been the enemy of the judiciary since before the Improvement Act was passed--especially the largest ones and their subsidiaries. That was their power, but even with that power they were just barely getting by.

Doujou's face was grim as he spoke, perhaps letting some of his own irritation seep through. As Iku watched him, she remembered something Tedzuka Satoshi had said.

"It's easier grumble about something and adapt to it than try to change it."

Did that also mean it was easier to remain ignorant than make the effort to learn about the repercussions of the law?

"...That's why incidents like these are so fortunate for us." His tone brightened considerably as he reached the conclusion of his lecture.

"--oh! Yes! What?"

"Were you even listening?" Doujou eyed her suddenly with deep suspicion. She nodded hastily, her head bobbing. Yes, she had been thinking about extraneous things, but she *had* been listening. One couldn't use the word "extraneous" otherwise.

"When a highly esteemed, highly visible person like Kousaka Daichi does something that raises questions about the Media Improvement Act, it gets a lot of people thinking about the problem who wouldn't have otherwise. And since it's Sesousha he's suing, the media will be paying attention to the case for as long as it drags out. I mean, part of the reason they're playing this scenario out is to provoke doubts across the industry. It may technically be a fight between Kousaka Daichi and Sesousha, but the Improvement Act's getting all the bad press."

"...Commander Genda planned that from the beginning!?" Such a plan was too extensive to be believed. Iku's voice rose in incredulity.

"Well, something close to that, anyway. After he gave his instructions to Orikuchi-san, he's been brooding about how everything would turn out. When he heard that Kousaka Daichi was on board, the commander called him an open-minded, great-hearted man."

Iku didn't know what to say for a few moments. Finally she heaved a sigh. "Commander Genda is incredible, isn't he."

She wasn't joking or being ironic. The conviction came from the bottom of her heart.

But Doujou laughed. "You think *he's* incredible," he teased her gently. "Think about Commander Inamine, who gives that maniac free rein."

And for the first time, Iku thought about it.

Base Commander Inamine, who had lost his leg, along with his wife, in the worst tragedy to ever befall the library, the Nightmare at Hino, and now sat in a wheelchair.

Iku had a strong image of him as a kindly, elegant old gentleman.

But someone who was only kindly and elegant would not give Genda free rein within an organization. No one was better at thinking up ridiculous ideas, and no one was worse at leading those blind charges. He was the kind of man who would normally be shunned and disliked within an organization. To leave such a man free to do as he liked--

I couldn't do it! If it was me, I couldn't do it! Not that there was the remotest chance that she'd ever be in that kind of position--but she still shivered.

"Though the principlist faction has never been in a better position..."

Doujou probably hadn't meant to say this out loud, for when Iku asked him to repeat it, he only said, "Nothing."

*

Thanks to Kousaka Daichi's case, criticism of the Improvement Act rose sharply, most fiercely among young women.

In light of the fact that Office Turn and Sesousha agreed that they wanted to publish the issue, the Tokyo District Court recommended a settlement. But it wasn't the one they had been hoping for.

The district court's proposal was for Sesousha to pay reparations to Kousaka Daichi and Office Turn--in spite of the fact that Kousaka's side had advocated heavily during the trial for the right to use the word *barber* in the issue, and that such a settlement had been proposed in earlier, similar cases.

It seemed that some force was working against them, someone who didn't want to see a publication come out of Sesousha with an officially-sanctioned taboo word in it. More than likely it was the Media Improvement Committee.

Obviously, it was a terrible problem to have some unknown power working behind the scenes at the courthouse, a supposed agency of justice. The weekly magazines, including *New World*, pushed this theory and roundly criticized the courts, but the newspapers and news shows started to back down one by one.

Isn't it about time that they settled?

Aren't they just being stubborn at this point?

If they lost the help of more influential media, the weekly magazines alone would never be able to argue their case effectively--and even if they did, they wouldn't be able to get public sympathy.

With the eye of the Media Improvement Committee fixed on Sesousha, it was likely that if they tried to publish the issue with the word *barber* intact, it would be censored before it ever appeared on the market. Holed up in its fortress, Sesousha decided that it couldn't comply with the district court's proposed settlement, and was equally dissatisfied with the decision that the judge had issued, which was more or less the same as the settlement. They decided to launch an appeal.

"But we want to put the issue within reach of as many fans as possible. I understand why Sesousha refuses to compromise, and I think the appeal was unavoidable. I don't think of this as fighting, but as an attempt to create an environment where they can release the best issue possible--an attempt that Office Turn supports wholeheartedly."

The media did come to interview Kousaka again, but overall, things looked grim.

But then, as Tokyo entered the rainy season, reinforcements arrived from a most unexpected source.

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Oh, well, we made the decision on account of the way Daichi-kun's been working so long and hard for us.

Well, and Daichi-kun's grandfather, now he's a good man, and he's always been on good terms with everyone at the Association. And anyhow, we didn't know know that *barber*, a perfectly ordinary word for those of us who work in the industry, had been turned into a--what did you call it, a "discriminatory term"?--had been turned into a slur for some arbitrary reason. That doesn't make us feel good, let me tell you.

The man before the camera, repeatedly wiping nervous sweat from his face as he spoke, was the chairman of the Tokyo Metropolitan Barbershop/Hairdresser Trades Association.

As Daichi-kun has said, *barber* may not be a recent word, it's true. But it's a living word, used today by people in their jobs day-to-day, old and young alike. Daichi-kun's grandfather has had a "*Barbershop*" sign outside of his place for years; it isn't very pleasant to hear that called "discriminatory" or "unprintable" or what have you.

But in spite of that, I think Daichi-kun was thinking of us when he got angry. And that attitude has touched us all. We thought, well, what are we doing just sitting here when Daichi-kun's out there fighting for us?

(I see, and that's why--)

Yes. *Ahem*. We, the Tokyo Metropolitan Barbershop/Hairdresser Trades Association, are suing the Media Improvement Committee in the Tokyo District Court to remove the word *barber* from the list of taboo words.

*

A copy of the tape of the interview was made immediately and circulated among the entire Library Force.

It was a little over five minutes long, but the news was worthy of at least that much airtime. Especially to the Library Force.

It was the first case since the Media Improvement Act had been passed where members of a profession themselves had sued the Improvement Committee to have their profession's name removed from its magpie collection of taboo words.

Iku, along with her squad, Genda, and (needless to say) Shibasaki, watched it in the commander's office.

"The winds of fortune are blowing our way now!" Genda said, evidently reinvigorated by the news.

The Media Improvement Committee had played with fire by interfering with Sesousha's case, and now it was going to get burned.

The outcome of the case would set the trend for all those that came after. Of course, there were some words that belonged on the taboo word list, but many had been added as a way to put pressure on journalists. If concerned parties were to press for their removal--

The Improvement Act's influence would plummet--or at least, teeter a little.

"The High Court should be returning its decision on Office Turn and Sesousha's case soon. I'll be surprised if it's the same one the District Court handed down." Doujou spoke as though the matter were all but decided. The High Court's decision would probably be completely in line with Kousaka and Sesousha's wishes.

Komaki was nodding too. "Circumstances have changed; it's not the place for spiteful little pranks anymore. They don't have the spare energy to spend putting pressure on the court's decision. In any case, these old men are the first ones to bypass the Improvement Special Agency and attack the Improvement Committee head-on."

"So do you think they can win?" Shibasaki asked, sounding as if she were about to start taking bets.

"I don't think that's the important question here. The time it'll take for that case to make its way through the courts will be measured in years. I'm more worried that their resolve will give out halfway through," Komaki said, sounding anxious.

"Oh, come on!" Shibasaki said, smacking him on the back. "If you're worried, bet on them winning. It's good luck."

"Shibasaki is right!" Genda said, slapping his knee. "Personally, I bet the old geezers can do it!"

"Whether they win or lose, it's going to cost the Committee either way," Tedzuka said wryly. His meaning was plain to everyone.

The Media Improvement Committee, who lay silently behind the Improvement Special Agency and used them to do the dirty work of censorship, did not want to draw any attention to itself. The Committee wanted the citizenry to remain indifferent about which words they made taboo and hunted down. Those who were battling the Media Improvement Act understood this. If they accidentally drew too much attention, everyone would know just how unjust and arbitrary their censorship was.

"...Hey, Earth to Kasahara," Shibasaki said, shaking Iku a little. "How come you're so quiet? Aren't you usually the one who's doing cartwheels whenever something like this happens?"

But Iku's bowed head did not rise an inch.

She stood up suddenly. "I'm really thirsty! I'm going to go get something to drink!"

And she fled the room, leaving her dumbfounded colleagues gaping after her.

After Iku had gone, Shibasaki muttered in exasperation, "What do you think that tea is right in front of you? Honestly!"

"What was that all about?" Tedzuka asked in honest confusion.

Shrugging, Shibasaki said, "When that idiot wants to go off and cry, her excuses are always completely transparent."

"Wait, she's going to cry? Why? Not because of what we were talking about!" Komaki was baffled.

"Don't ask me, I'm not Kasahara, remember? Anyway, more importantly--" Shibasaki had nonchalantly reached over and was helping herself to Iku's tea cakes as she spoke, "--isn't this the part where someone from her team gets up and follows her?"

Everyone looked at her for a second, then after a beat Doujou sullenly rose.

"I'm going as her superior officer, okay?"

With this completely unnecessary announcement, Doujou headed for the door. The moment he had gone, the entire room, except for Tedzuka, burst into peals of laughter. Poor left-out Tedzuka was flabbergasted.

"That idiot! They're *both* completely transparent!"

"He's been like that ever since I first met him--he always has to tack on these unnecessary excuses that ruin his credibility."

"Don't say a word to them! It's what makes them so lovable!"

"Uh...wha...huh?" Tedzuka stammered.

Shibasaki patted him on the back. "Don't worry about it. Your obliviousness manages to be one of *your* lovable points."

Tedzuka subsided into a sulky silence, feeling handled. The other three burst out laughing once more.

"I told you last time, pick a more typical spot for a girl to go and cry." Doujou, his brow wrinkled, sat on his heels and peered down at Iku. "Under a bush, behind a warehouse...are you a cat!?"

Instead of hiding under a bush like last time, Iku was behind one of the large open-air warehouses. The weather was warm enough to sit on the concrete, and the eaves would shelter her from the off-and-on rain, which must have been the deciding factor.

Muttering a curse, Doujou sat down beside Iku. "So what happened in there?"

Iku wasn't able to articulate an answer to his question right away. "...Do you...think th-those people can...win?" she asked.

Doujou looked grave. Even when he was trying to console her, he never dressed up the truth. "I hope they can win." Meaning he was hopeful, but not confident.

"It'll be hard, won't it," Iku probed.

"In this day and age, yes. Lawsuits against one's country are always tricky; there are cases that have taken decades to resolve. I don't know if they're emotionally prepared to fight that long, and even if they are, it will be hard to withstand the pressure. I don't know what kind of practical preparations they've made, either..."

If the fight dragged on too painfully long, Kousaka himself would probably intervene eventually. From the interview, it appeared that sympathy for Kousaka had driven the Association's decision. The unexpected suit would probably do wonders for Kousaka's case, but it was unclear if it could bear any other fruit.

"They'll have to decide when it's time to quit," Doujou said, and then hastily added, "But that doesn't mean that their suit is futile! The fact that they were the first to raise their voices against the Media Improvement Committee is profoundly meaningful--they'll probably earn a place in the history books. If the Improvement Act is one day overturned, the day they raised an objection to the Act and instigated the first legal proceedings against it will probably be considered a turning point." Doujou's attempts to cheer Iku up had turned into a rare display of passion.

Iku nodded in agreement, her arms still wrapped around her knees. "That makes me happy."

"...Happy enough to cry?" Doujou asked, frowning a little.

Slowly, so that she wouldn't break down into tears, Iku began to speak. "It was something Tedzuka Satoshi told me," she said in a small voice. "He said that our existence did nothing to stamp out censorship at the fundamental level. The Library Force operates under the assumption that there's censorship to oppose, and all our battles against it do nothing but treat the symptoms. They don't eliminate censorship. He said that this society is warped, and our battle is warped along with it." A sob escaped her throat. She stopped for a moment to regain her composure. "And that at this rate censorship will never go away. People are too used to the way society is now, so they let it continue. Because it's easier than fighting. He said no one would lift a finger to even try to get rid of censorship." At last, Iku wiped away her tears. Her voice grew stronger. "That's why those people make me so happy. Because even if they're only doing it because they

let their feelings for Kousaka get the better of them--even if the impact is tiny--even if it's only for one word--it means that there are people out there who are actively fighting against censorship. It means that he wasn't *all* right after all."

"Why..." Doujou whispered, then rounded on Iku. "Why didn't you ever tell me that he tried to hurt you with that vicious line of bullshit!?"

His roar had Iku scooting away in unconscious panic.

Now wait a damn minute, should he really be getting angry with me at time like this? Not that I was hoping for much, but wouldn't comforting your subordinate be the usual response here!?

Doujou's arm suddenly snaked out. Instinctively, she ducked--but Doujou's hand seized the top of her head and levered it back to face him.

"No matter how reasonable it sounds, it's an arrogant line of reasoning from someone who considers himself outside this warped society. As long as we live in this age, none of us can be free of the effects of that warp. Even Tedzuka Satoshi. Don't let yourself be hurt by some idiot who thinks he's overcome it from within!"

She knew there was no reason to be hurt, but Tedzuka Satoshi's words, overflowing with confidence, had hurt her anyway. Those words that had been aimed straight at her insecurities.

"What we do has meaning, right...?"

"Of course it does, idiot!" Doujou shouted bluntly. "Don't fall for some con man's tricks! Don't let his empty speculation make you cry! Next time some bastard gets you all turned around, do pushups or something until you collapse!"

His rebuke actually made her feel better. She realized that she had wanted him to yell at her, wanted him to tell her how ridiculous the lies she had believed were.

The discovery made her sob like a little girl. *No, I don't cry like this. I'm a grown woman.* But she couldn't stop.

Until her crying jag was over, Doujou waited silently beside her, sitting close enough that she could feel the warmth of his shoulder next to hers.

At last, Iku's sobs subsided.

"Okay, come on." Doujou stood up first and extended his hand to Iku.

"Wait, you want me to do pushups now!?" Iku shrank back.

"If you think it would help, I don't mind," Doujou said grumpily. "Anyway, you said you were leaving to go get a drink. I don't think that lie will hold up if you go back empty-handed, do you?"

Remembering the time during her training period when she had been trapped in the same lie by Shibasaki, Iku gratefully grabbed his proffered hand and hauled herself up.

After they had been walking a short time, Doujou hastily released her hand and assumed a more businesslike attitude. Her empty hand felt a little forlorn, and she wondered for a moment what would happen if she asked him if they could hold hands just a little bit longer. But as she flushed red just thinking about it, there was no way she could actually act on the impulse.

*

As nearly everyone had predicted, the High Court granted Kousaka Daichi and Sesousha's wish. Kousaka Daichi's special issue would be able to use the word *barber* without fear of censorship.

"Thanks. I owe you for that underhanded scheme," said Orikuchi, who had come to visit the Task Force office.

Genda snorted a laugh. "You've still got a long way to go if you couldn't come up with that one by yourself."

Further conversation was drowned out by a high-pitched squeal. It was Shibasaki.

"I've been your biggest fan ever since you starred in *My Dear Shrew*! It's a tremendous privilege to meet you!"

Grasped firmly in her two hands was the hand of Kousaka Daichi, who for some unknowable reason had come with Orikuchi. In the corner stood a man who might have been his manager. The man kept checking his watch; they probably couldn't be here for long.

"Thank you," Kousaka said amiably, being used to the effect he had on fans. He fell into easy conversation with Shibasaki.

"Unbelievable," Iku whispered to Tedzuka as she watched her squealing friend from a safe distance. "If that's all an act to get his autograph so she can sell it, I'll eat my badge."

"...I think you're right," Tedzuka nodded.

Just then, a member of one of the other squads hesitantly interrupted Kousaka and Shibasaki.

"Pardon me, but my wife is a big fan of yours...could I trouble you for an autograph?" He held out a piece of autograph paper.

As if a dam had burst, Kousaka was suddenly surrounded by Force members calling out variations on this theme. "My daughter..." "My little sister..." They had all run to the neighborhood stationary store after the hasty announcement of Kousaka's coming.

"Are you sure you don't want to get his autograph, Instructor Doujou? You mentioned once that you have a little sister. And Instructor Komaki, maybe for Marié or someone..."

"Why should I have to run out and buy autograph paper for that kid?" Doujou said, sounding just like one of Iku's brothers.

"I texted and asked if she wanted one," Komaki said. "Apparently she's more interested in autographs from her favorite authors."

A ring of autograph-seekers surrounded Kousaka, who cheerfully obliged them. Shibasaki quietly slipped out of that crowd and came over to Iku and Tedzuka.

Seeing that she was empty-handed, Iku prodded, "What happened to your autograph?"

"He arrived so suddenly that I forgot to go get autograph paper. It happens to the best of us."

"Pretty careless of you, since I took the trouble to secretly text you that he was coming," Iku deadpanned.

Shibasaki assumed a melodramatic expression and clutched her chest (infuriatingly, larger than Iku's). "Teased by you! What a disgrace! I think my heart is going to stop from the shock of it all!"

"You! You and your habit of saying whatever you feel like! One of these days I'd like to put you in an interrogation room and ask you just who the hell you think you are!"

"No, I'd be shocked too," Tedzuka put in.

"No one asked you, mini-Doujou!"

"What did you say about me?" Doujou asked icily, apparently having overheard Iku's retort.

"No, hold on, I definitely wasn't bad-mouthing you...!" *Dammit, how did this happen? Why am I stuck making frantic excuses?* she thought, and glared at Shibasaki and Tedzuka, who callously assumed the expressions of innocent bystanders.

In time, the crowd around Kousaka dispersed, and he was summoned by Orikuchi into the commander's office.

"It's an honor to meet you, sir," Kousaka said, extending his hand. Genda took it with a bemused expression. Orikuchi had told him that Kousaka wanted to meet him, but she hadn't told him why.

"You have unexpectedly rugged hands," Genda told him. Just by holding it he could count the calluses and blisters. Kousaka's knuckles were also larger, and his grip stronger, than Genda would have expected.

"Some of the roles I get cast in involve sword fighting, so I've been training in preparation. Not actual fighting, you understand, but it wouldn't do to be too scrawny-looking."

"You shouldn't have said it was 'unexpected,' Genda-kun," Orikuchi put in. "Kousaka-san is famous for the preparation he puts into his roles. When he was cast as a member of the Ground Self-Defense Forces, he spent a while participating in real drills."

"Just for two weeks, though, and it was all I could do just to get a glimpse of what it was like. By the end I felt like I was dragging my body through mud."

"Ha ha! If you survived two weeks over there you must be really something. How would you like to try our drills?"

Genda meant it as a joke, but Kousaka nodded gravely.

"If I'm ever cast as a Library Defense Force member, I'll take you up on that offer."

His determination was appreciated, but no film company or television station would make such a movie when they knew from the start there was no way it could be shown or aired.

"Right, so when Hell freezes over. Anyway..." Genda continued, glancing at Orikuchi, "what exactly was your business with me?" Genda hated when everyone else knew what was going on but him.

"Oh, nothing so formal that I would call it 'business.' I simply wanted to meet you."

"Excuse me?"

"When talks between my agency and Sesousha were stalled, Orikuchi came in with a devious trick--maybe I should call it a dirty trick?--anyway, I can only call it brilliant. I knew right away that Orikuchi-san hadn't come up with it herself."

"How? She's a clever woman in her own way. It wouldn't have surprised me if she *had* come up with it."

Orikuchi, flustered, nipped this line of questioning in the bud. "What does it matter? Kousaka just knew it wasn't my idea, end of story!"

Genda was disgruntled by the way she forcibly redirected the conversation, but Kousaka respected her wishes. It made no sense to interrupt the conversation to have an argument about how to continue

it. "So, I wanted to meet you. A group of grown men--media professionals--put their heads together and couldn't come up with anything, but you managed to think up that ridiculous scheme after only hearing about it once. I wanted to meet you and see what kind of man you were. Call it an actor's professional curiosity."

"Huh," said Genda succinctly. "Well, what do you think, now that you've met me? I wasn't worth coming all this way for, was I?"

"You *were* worth coming all this way for," Kousaka retorted impishly. "Orikuchi-san said this to me. She said, you weren't the kind of man I would end up playing. And she was right, for now. But," he said, his voice strong, "One day I would like to be the kind of man who could play someone like you."

When Kousaka emerged from the commander's office, only Doujou's squad remained to see him off. Since it was obvious that the news that Kousaka Daichi was visiting the Library Base would cause a panic throughout the base and the library, he was traveling incognito. The Library Task Force members had been sworn to silence, except where Shibasaki was involved.

Kousaka donned the glasses he used to disguise himself, preparing to leave. Before she could stop herself, Iku asked, "Will just those glasses be enough?"

"It's only to the parking lot, after all. For that distance, a less elaborate disguise is actually more inconspicuous."

As they spoke, the impulse rose up in her. Here was a person she would probably never have the chance to meet again.

"Um, pardon me, but could I shake your hand?"

"Of course," Kousaka said, holding out a good-natured hand. She had just enough time to be surprised by the calluses on his hands before he let go.

After they saw him off, Doujou said, in a rare mocking tone, "See, I told you you were starstruck." He sounded a little triumphant.

Iku scratched her head and grinned in embarrassment. "I thought I shouldn't waste my chance, since we'll probably never meet again."

The moment she said it, Tedzuka suddenly got up and ran out of the room. As the gaping door swung shut, they could see that he was running in the direction that Orikuchi and the others had gone.

"...wait, don't tell me you're a fan too!" Iku cried in surprise, though he was too far away to hear her. Doujou, Komaki, and even Genda stared dumbfounded at the door as it slowly closed.

"I'm sorry, but could I beg a moment of your time?" Tedzuka called to the line of retreating guests.

Orikuchi turned around and chided him. "Why, Tedzuka-kun, what are you doing here? You're not Iku-chan, you know."

"I'm truly sorry, please excuse me," Tedzuka said, bowing deeply from the waist. "I know that I'm bothering you on your way home, but, um...could I please have an autograph too?"

Orikuchi's eyes went round as saucers. It probably wasn't the kind of request she thought she would ever hear coming out of Tedzuka's mouth.

"Of course," Kousaka answered before his manager could object. "You're one of Genda-san's subordinates, right?" *So it's fine*, his tone seemed to imply. "But what would you like me to sign on? I don't really have time to wait for you to go out and buy autograph paper."

Tedzuka hadn't even realized until Kousaka mentioned it. He patted the pockets of his uniform, searching for something that would serve as a substitute--then inspiration struck. He drew from his jacket pocket--a handkerchief.

"On this."

It was a lucky thing that regulations stated that the handkerchief worn with their uniform had to be plain and white. The logic was that it made it easier to check for the presence of blood when using the handkerchief for first-aid, but that didn't matter now.

Orikuchi pulled out a felt-tip pen from her business case, and held up the case so it could be used as a writing surface.

"Wow, it's just like the ones the JDSF have."

Probably because it had been ironed within an inch of its life and folded with meticulous precision. Members of the Library Force, too, were taught to iron their things during their training period.

Kousaka unfolded the handkerchief, laid it flat on Orikuchi's bag, and signed it as though he did this all the time. He probably got plenty of requests during random encounters with fans to sign on cloth.

The handkerchief was folded and returned to him, and Tedzuka bowed again.

"Thank you, I'm sorry to take up your time."

"Don't worry about it. It took less time than it would take to eat a cup of instant ramen; I don't call that lost time."

Kousaka and the others continued on their way back. Until they turned a corner and were lost to his sight, Tedzuka stood at attention and watched them go.

Iku hounded him mercilessly when he got back to the office, but he managed to turn the tables on her.

"I was a secret fan of his, okay!? You got a problem with that? Tell the whole base for all I care!"

She didn't say a word after that.

*

A few days after Kousaka's visit, Tedzuka took advantage of a break in training to seek out Shibasaki in the library. He hadn't wanted to do so during patrol; that would mean making patrol buddy wait, and he didn't want to risk anyone guessing what he was up to.

"Aren't you in the middle of practice? What's up?" she asked casually.

He took out his handkerchief and thrust it in her direction. "Don't unfold it completely. Fold it back up once you understand what it is. It'll be pandemonium if any of the other women see it."

Shibasaki took the handkerchief from him dubiously. She raised just one corner, then quickly lowed it again. Then she glared up at Tedzuka. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Do what you like with it."

Tedzuka knew very well that she was too proud to show weakness in front of others. He knew very well that she used biting sarcasm to hide her real feelings.

So he knew why she hadn't been able to confess that she was actually a fan of Kousaka Daichi.

"You could consider it an investment and auction it off for a fortune, couldn't you?" But if she had actually been planning to do that, Shibasaki of all people would have never made the mistake of forgetting to buy autograph paper before meeting Kousaka. "But Kousaka Daichi looked surprised when you mentioned *My Dear Shrew*. I'm no expert, but wasn't that one of his very early roles, before he was popular?" he probed.

Shibasaki sighed in resignation and confessed. "...It was a B-movie. It came out, oh, about six or seven years ago?" A look of nostalgia passed over her face, and she looked down at the handkerchief in her hand. "It was based on a book, one that I liked. The movie didn't get a lot of attention, but it was well-made, and Kousaka Daichi did a particularly good job as the main character. So ever since then, I've been a bit partial to him. Just a tiny, tiny bit."

"Man, you don't know when to give up, do you?" he said, raising his eyebrows. Then he thought of a good retort; he took what Shibasaki had once said to him and turned it back on her. "But I'll say that your stubbornness manages to be one of your lovable points."

"Well, you're certainly good at discovering people's weaknesses when it counts. What a wonderful personality trait," Shibasaki snapped.

For Tedzuka, it was like getting a first taste of victory.

"Thank you," Shibasaki said with her back turned. "Since you went to all the trouble, I'd be honored to accept it."

The casual way she waved the handkerchief was at odds with her polite words. But when Tedzuka imagined her going back to her room, packing the handkerchief away like a precious treasure, and hiding it deep in a dresser drawer where Iku couldn't find it, he grinned a little and his spirits lifted.

*

The amusing thought carried him through the day, but that evening something happened to Tedzuka that caused his mood to hit rock-bottom.

His brother Satoshi put in a call for him--uninvited, as usual--to the phone in the men's dorm manager's office.

"What the hell do you want?"

The dorm manager had politely gone to the room where he slept and closed the door to give Tedzuka privacy, but he still kept his voice low. Being forced to talk to someone whose existence he would rather forget made his tone sharp, but Satoshi's nerves didn't even register the slight.

Sometimes Tedzuka thought Satoshi's nerves might actually be made of steel. And no wonder, for Satoshi responded with his usual unflagging good cheer.

"Oh, nothing. I was just amused by what happened recently, and it made me want to chat with you."

He must have meant the incident with Kousaka Daichi and the Hairdresser Trades Association.

"I wouldn't have thought you would find it amusing. I thought the Library of Tomorrow Project's main purpose was to kiss up to the Improvement Committee."

For Satoshi, who wanted to bring the library under one central authority as a federal organization, his line to the Improvement Committee must be very valuable indeed. And the Improvement Committee must be up in arms over the unexpected blow from the Sesousha case.

"You still see things as so black-and-white," Satoshi scolded him with a wry smile. Color flared in Tedzuka's cheeks. He had *known* better than to say anything--but it was hard for him to resist the urge to be snide with Satoshi, thanks to their history of animosity. In the end, it made him look like a fool. "The Library of Tomorrow Project's line of communication terminates in the Justice Department. All we hear about the Improvement Committee and the Special Agency is what comes through those contacts. Also, the Justice Department is not a monolithic organization--just like the Library Force isn't a monolith either."

Dammit. He hated himself for giving Satoshi the opportunity to lecture him on something he already knew full well.

"The Library of Tomorrow Project's goal is to become a federal organization on the same level as the Improvement Committee. Thus, we actually welcome it when our opponent's position is weakened. My best-case scenario involves the Improvement Committee imploding due to its own actions."

Compared to Tedzuka's hard tone, Satoshi's was as cool and refreshing as a spring breeze. This fresh reminder of the difference between them was mortifying.

"However, they are not such a fragile organization that we can count on their accidental self-destruction. What I'm counting on is those little accidental flaws and weaknesses. When the Library Force becomes a federal organization, we'll probably have to bow down to the Improvement Committee, but I'd like to make that bow as shallow as possible."

"I'm hanging up," Tedzuka interrupted. If he let the conversation continue, he might be forced to acknowledge that his brother had a point.

This was an argument that stemmed from a fundamental difference in their beliefs. Tedzuka had decided that no matter how reasonable his brother's ideas sounded, he would never support them. Even when he was surrounded by people who shared his beliefs unwaveringly, thanks to all the friction between Tedzuka and his brother over the years, it was still irrationally painful to acknowledge that his brother could ever be right.

"Also, don't call this number again."

"But what am I supposed to do? You don't answer your cell phone when I call."

Tedzuka gripped the receiver and squeezed his eyes shut. And thought of the cheeky girl whose head barely reached his shoulder, with whom he had been exchanging intelligence on a regular basis.

"I think I have a natural aptitude for intelligence work, if I do say so myself. In fact, I think I could sleep with my target, if the need arose."

He thought of her, back turned, making this boast without a hint of pain in her tone. He thought of her waving the autographed handkerchief he had gotten for her, back turned again, as if she were completely indifferent. But never letting him see her expression.

"...if you call my cell phone, I'll do my best to answer it."

Tedzuka was the closest to Satoshi--to the Library of Tomorrow Project. Maybe, if Tedzuka was willing to put up with Satoshi's capricious phone calls, he could lighten that cheeky, handsome woman's burden just a little.

"Oh, so diplomatic channels have been reopened?"

"Don't get carried away," Tedzuka shot back. "I will always be opposed to your ideas, and I haven't forgiven you the way you left our family in shambles. If you think this is a chance for a reconciliation, you're sadly mistaken. All I'm saying is that if you have something you need to talk to me about, I'll talk to you. It would be a nuisance for me if you kept calling the dorm phone every time you wanted to chat," he snapped.

Satoshi laughed delightedly on the other end of the phone. "After the cold way you've been treating me up until now, it's enough of a compromise for me. I'm grateful."

"Only when you have something you need to talk to me about, alright! Don't press your luck and call me all the time just to shoot the breeze!" he warned.

"Fine, fine," Satoshi said, and hung up.

Chapter 4, A Sudden Homecoming: Patrolling the Ibaraki Prefectural Art Exhibition

*

"Ibaraki Prefectural Libraryyyyyyyy!?"

Iku's scream resounded through the Library Task Force all-hands meeting.

"Something wrong, Kasahara?" Assistant Commander Ogata interrupted his briefing to ask dubiously.

Doujou's hand snaked around from behind and covered her mouth, shutting her up. "It's nothing, please continue."

But Iku, who was still inching towards the realization that she felt something special for Doujou, was unprepared for this sudden treatment by him. She tried to jerk away, and before she knew what she was doing, she had bitten down hard on Doujou's hand.

"Owww! Shit!" Doujou shook his hand, rattled.

"Something wrong, Team Doujou?"

"Nothing wrong with the team, sir, it's just Doujou and Chief Librarian Kasahara at it again," Komaki put in. "Please continue."

Ogata went on with his briefing as though nothing had happened. This unflappable man, after all, had to deal with Genda on a regular basis.

To make a long story short, the Task Force would be deploying to the Ibaraki Prefectural Library to lend their support.

Ten years ago, the Ibaraki Prefectural Library had relocated to the Ibaraki Museum of Modern Art on the shore of Lake Senba. Since then, they had hosted a two-week prefectural art exhibition every January. The grounds of the library were opened up, and sculptures and other large-scale works were exhibited outside. When the library began saving the pamphlets that were created every year, it turned into a joint event between the library and the museum.

During this explanation, Doujou's disgruntled voice came from behind her.

"Dammit, why did you have to bite me?"

"W-Well..." Iku hunched her shoulders and hid her face, glancing back at Doujou out of the corner of her eye. Her flushed cheeks were still hot. "I've never had a man put his hand over my mouth before."

"Idi--I was trying to stop my subordinate from making a scene in the middle of an all-hands meeting! What does being a man or a woman have to do with it!?"

Nooo, quit pushing! Seeking a quick escape, Iku's hand shot up. She stood when Ogata called on her. "Why would such a peaceful event need support from the Task Force?"

"Hm. Well, I guess I'll cut to the chase." Ogata had apparently been planning a step-by-step explanation, but changed his mind. "Turn to the last page of the outline," he directed them.

The room was filled with the sound of rustling paper as Iku reached the last page. The single-page color copy left her speechless, and had the same effect on everyone else.

"That is this year's blue-ribbon work."

The last page was a color photo of a canvas--not a normal oil painting, but a collage, as it was easy to see even from the photograph.

The background was a wall of unfinished concrete. Tacked right in the center was an Improvement Special Agency uniform, treated to make it look old and worn out of shape. There was a giant rip in the chest of the uniform, and through that hole, a photograph of a clear blue sky peeked out.

Its title was *Freedom*.

The Improvement Special Agency would have never given one of its own uniforms to be used for such a purpose. The artist had made an exquisite reproduction.

If a work like this one had won the grand prize, then--

"The exhibition of the prizewinning works opens the week after next, but protest demonstrations by groups that support the Improvement Act have already grown intense. The Improvement Special Agency, of course, will probably show up at some point to seize or censor the work. The Prefectural Library is so worried about safety of its patrons that it's closing its doors until the exhibition is over."

Genda took over. "The Ibaraki prefectural headquarters at Mito has no experience with a situation of this magnitude. They've gathered Defense Force members from all over the prefecture, but apparently they're having trouble establishing a chain of command. We'll be providing not only assistance, but that missing command structure. And realistically, if we don't step in and take over, they're going to fall apart."

Iku was shocked that her home prefecture's library was in such a sorry state. But the thing she was most worried about was--

"In conclusion, we'll be deploying about half our squads to Ibaraki in support."

--who would be going to Ibaraki.

"I'll be in charge; Ogata will hold down the fort here. The squads I'll be taking with me are: Aoki, Sekiguchi, Udagawa, Haga, and Doujou."

This time, to keep himself from being bitten, Doujou used his sleeve to cover Iku's mouth.

"I-Is our squad really going?" Iku turned to Doujou to ask after the meeting was over.

Doujou glared at her steadily. "Before we get to that, isn't there something you'd like to say to me?" he asked, waving his bitten hand ostentatiously.

"I-I'm sorry....did it hurt?"

"It hurt."

"I'm so sorry."

"Alright."

Fortunately, Doujou wasn't the type to hold a grudge either.

"So, does our squad really have to...?"

"Are you the same person who flew off the handle at me when I left you out of the deployment at the Battle for the Museum of Information History?"

"But--yeah, but..."

Ibaraki was Iku's birthplace and where her parents made their home. Since her parents were certain to faint dead away or suffer hysterics if they found out that Iku held a combat position, she would much rather have been left out of the deployment this time.

"After that, I gave a lot of thought to how to best make use of your skills." Doujou spoke in a painfully serious tone. "I was completely wrong to order you kept out of that battle. Yes, you're a woman, but we could have used you, and my personal prejudices kept me from recognizing that. I also created the imbalance that exists today, where Tedzuka has large-scale combat experience and you don't, even though you enlisted at the same time. Commander Genda probably put our squad in the lineup with an eye to rectifying that injustice. So I will never meddle with your deployment orders again. Because if you follow orders, you will never be a hindrance to any

battle plan. Sometimes you're too rash, but that's a lot better than someone who freezes in the face of danger."

If only they hadn't been heading to her hometown, how happy would Doujou's words have made her, and what might they have caused her to do?

"I...I'm glad to hear you say so, but..." Iku's protest trailed off.

Komaki interjected, "What I'm hearing is Doujou acknowledging you as a worthy subordinate, on the same level as Tedzuka. I suppose you *could* selfishly run away and betray Doujou's trust in you..."

"No!" Iku cried unthinkingly. If Doujou trusted her... "I don't want to betray Instructor Doujou. Or the rest of the squad," she tacked on hastily. She wanted to look away, but she kept her chin high and looked straight at Doujou.

His expression softened just a little.

"Your parents may not find you. But still, isn't it about time you girded your loins and gave them the bad news like a good girl? And who knows? You may find you have an unexpected ally," he concluded mysteriously.

"Aw man, but *this time* I really wish I could be with the group that gets left behind, you know?"

Iku put on a brave face in front of her teammates, but back in her room alone with Shibasaki, her anxiety began to peek out. Though it was idle grumbling; she knew full well that her assignment wouldn't be changed.

"Where is your parents' house, exactly?"

"On the outskirts of Mito...but they come downtown a lot."

Her parents weren't active patrons of the library--*so maybe as long as I don't go strolling around town I'll be okay?* she thought, when Shibasaki said, "I've heard there's been a lot of news coverage on the local TV stations, so be careful." To this unwelcome report, Shibasaki added, "Also, remember the backcountry intelligence network."

This was another worrying thought. Small towns had strong networks, and she feared the all-too-likely possibility that even if she kept to the very center of town, someone would say to her parents, "Guess who I saw downtown yesterday?" Her mother had a large circle of local friends and acquaintances, and the idea that one of them might say, "I ran into Iku-chan!" or even "Wasn't that Iku-chan I saw on the news?"--well, it didn't bear thinking about.

"I wonder just how much news coverage? My mom's not the type to pay much attention to the news. She also doesn't have any interest in the library, so I can't imagine her coming near it, especially when there's a conflict going on."

She was trying as hard as possible to look on the bright side--
--but she'd still probably have to wear a hat the whole time.
It made her feel like a fugitive criminal.

"By the way," Shibasaki said, suddenly serious, "I don't want to give you any preconceptions, but there's been a noticeable bias in the Ibaraki library world for the past few years, centered around the Prefectural Library. Be careful."

"What kind of bias?"

"Hm. Not to put too fine a point on it, but the status of the Defense Force has fallen dramatically."

"Whaddya mean?" Iku drew her brows together.

Shibasaki continued speculatively. "I won't deny that they've got a few hurdles ahead of them with this art exhibition, but I've never heard of a library asking for assistance because they can't even maintain a chain of command. Usually, the assisting force and the force needing assistance get together and figure out how to split the command between them. It's made more difficult than it has to be if one side is trying too hard to save face, but blithely passing the entire command to someone else? The purpose of the Task Force is to lend out uniquely-skilled personnel to the entire Kantou region. There are times when the Task Force is in command from the beginning, like the Battle for the Museum of Information History, but this... 'Come and help us because we can't maintain control'? It's completely pathetic," Shibasaki said with a frown.

Ah, that's why Commander Genda is going, Iku realized. If that was the situation, it made perfect sense to send someone with authority and rank. Also, Genda had commanded a large-scale battle at the Museum of Information History, and achieved something there. Something so enduring that ten years wouldn't be enough to erase it.

"If the status of the Defense Force has fallen, does that mean the librarians are above them in the pecking order?" Iku asked innocently.

Shibasaki scowled. "At a *proper* library, all roles have the same status. To establish a pecking order based on anything but rank and position is unforgivable, but..." Shibasaki's information network didn't stretch far enough for her to say anything definite--which was only natural, since Ibaraki was at the far north end of Kantou. "You

especially need to take care, since you'll be the only woman staying with them."

Shibasaki seemed unusually concerned. She was probably remembering when the entire dorm had shunned Iku last year after she had been falsely accused of a notorious crime.

It would indeed be painful to endure similar treatment again. But, "I'll be fine. It's a lot worse when it comes from people I know."

At the time, Iku had felt like she was living under a microscope, her every move scrutinized. Even now, there were some few women who acted friendly, as though nothing had happened, but no longer felt that Iku could be fully trusted. She had learned, too, how to endure that kind of false camaraderie.

It didn't matter what kind of treatment she received at Ibaraki. After all that she had gone through, she might consider unfriendly treatment irritating, but she would only be there temporarily, and thus it wouldn't have any deep significance.

"You've gotten tougher," Shibasaki said, the compliment evident in her words if not her tone.

"I won't be alone. Anyway..."

You will never be a hindrance to any battle plan.

Doujou's simple words of validation made her feel strong enough to overcome that fear.

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Tedzuka Satoshi was on the phone. On the other end of the line was Musashino First Library Director Etou.

"The Library Task Force is deploying support troops to Ibaraki. About half their forces. Supervisor Genda is in command. Doujou's squad is going as well."

"I see; well, it's as we expected. They underestimate the situation. Which is convenient for us."

He would have liked to keep the squad his brother belonged to out of the deployment if he could--that was how dear he was to him. Though if he said that to the boy himself, he would probably be the recipient of harsh accusations: *"That's not familial love; that's just your own selfishness!"*

"We can use this as an opportunity to balance the scales once more," Etou remarked happily.

Satoshi nodded as he spoke into the phone. "The Improvement Committee took quite a hit during that trial business. Now it's the Library Force's turn."

The Library of Tomorrow Project--and Satoshi--held that in order to bring about the fundamental elimination of censorship, the Library Force had to become an official federal organization, just like the Improvement Committee.

Satoshi's dream was that the Library Force, as a national government organization under the Ministry of Culture, would fight with the Justice Department over the constitutionality of censorship itself. But the current Library Force's foundations were--how should one say--too inflexible to achieve that purpose. Even the gulf between the principlists and the governmentalsists wasn't wide enough to drive a dividing wedge between.

The Library Force would also find it difficult to swallow a plan that involved giving up a measure of their power and participating in censorship, even if it was only temporarily. The Library Force of today didn't have the necessary flexibility. Though whether one would call that quality "flexibility" or some other word probably depended on one's viewpoint.

Is that too due to the influence of that man who survived Hino?
As a member of the generation that hadn't lived through the Hino incident, Satoshi couldn't help but feel some honest respect for him.

The rational people that agreed with his long-term plan to eliminate censorship--the neutral faction, he called them for convenience--were becoming an invisible third faction after the principlist faction and the governmentalist faction. The pipeline he had succeeded in opening to the Justice Department had greatly impressed the younger generation.

But even Satoshi, who had the courage to argue the point with his father, the president of the Japan Library Association, had no desire to reveal his plans and dispute them with Inamine. After observing him for a long time, Satoshi had decided that Inamine would never bend. Inamine was a part of the history of the Library Force itself; there was not the smallest vulnerability that Satoshi could take advantage of.

The Library of Tomorrow Project's plan did have one fatal weakness.

--Just as that girl had said.

The image of Kasahara Iku, who called herself a friend of his brother, rose up in his mind's eye.

The Library Force would have to give up most of its power to fight censorship in exchange for its elevation to a federal organization, and the time that it would take to fully eliminate censorship after that would be measured in decades. During that period, the citizenry would have to be forced to accept censorship. (Of course, the neutral faction had weighed the risks, and decided that they were worth taking if it would mean the eradication of censorship.)

And that girl who seemed so dim-witted... Satoshi chuckled to himself.

Talking with that girl who has seemed so stupid and easily persuadable had caused him to realize just how thoroughly Inamine's principles had permeated the Library Force.

"But it's getting to be the time when Commander Inamine could perhaps retire and leave the picture. I'm looking forward to seeing if the Library Force will be able to stick to its ideals once he's gone."

Etou, whose position as a key member of the Library of Tomorrow Project was quite assuredly a secret, answered in a steady tone. "Indeed."

"By the way, how's the Library Force's experiment into intelligence gathering going?"

"Er, well, according to Asahina's report..." The man had a tendency to mumble when he had only unfavorable news to deliver. "He says that the experiment is still just in the experimental stage."

"What about that one promising girl who was his contact?"

"He says he observed her for a while, but he couldn't tell whether she was an intelligence force cadet or just a gossip-lover. She did know more than she should have, but on the other hand, she was also surprisingly loose-lipped; given that, he thought that her aptitude for the work was dangerous. He thought that if she was a cadet, she might not have been told yet and they could still be evaluating her."

"Hmm." Satoshi nodded as he took in this information. "Well, it was just a rumor, after all. And even if we confirmed it, we already have some ideas about how to deal with her, so let's let her be for now." Satoshi had a feeling he might hear something different if he pressed Asahina directly, but Asahina was also one of his valuable allies in the Justice Department. If Asahina thought Satoshi didn't trust him, it might create a rift in their relationship, and that was something he wanted to avoid. "Since it's Commander Inamine, he probably has no lack of talented people to gather information for him."

After the call had ended, Satoshi sat in his personal office and idly toyed with his cell phone. At the Kawasaki Ward Library, which had become the Library of Tomorrow Project's headquarters within the Kantou Library Force, Satoshi was the leader in all but name. He had even been able to order Sunagawa's transfer to a nearby branch.

Satoshi knew that he toyed with his cell phone only when he was annoyed.

This time, it was probably at the memory of Kasahara Iku that had surfaced during his phone call with Etou.

He had never liked stupid women--but that wasn't the only reason for his sudden irritation.

"After his own brother did such a horrible thing to him, I don't have the heart to do something horrible to him myself. Tedzuka is my friend."

"I couldn't give someone such an awful message--one that tries to exploit his feelings of duty toward a squadmate. Not to a friend. Not from his own brother. Tell him yourself. That way I won't hurt Tedzuka any more than he's already been hurt."

"His opinions may be different from yours, but please don't hurt Tedzuka any more than you have to. I don't want to help anyone hurt my own friends."

That stupid girl had looked him straight in the eye and attacked him. Over the methods he was using to try and draw his brother in.

"...what does an outsider understand?"

He used coercive methods *because* he held his brother in such high regard, *because* he wanted to have him for his own. To Satoshi, siblings deserved the kind of attachment that would drive one to use those methods. He was considerate enough to want to share the glorious deed of ridding Japan of censorship with his family--and just because he had used some strong-arm tactics, he had been lectured by a stranger about hurting his brother. It was unwarranted.

The woman didn't--*couldn't*--esteem his brother more than he did. Yet his brother had chosen Kasahara Iku, and the rest of his Task Force squadmates, over him.

From Iku's tirade, one might think that *Satoshi* was the only one doing the hurting. He would show her. Almost competitively, Satoshi punched his brother's number into his cell phone.

*

A number that Tedzuka had stubbornly resisted entering a name for called his cell phone just as he was coming out of the bath. Since both his roommates were in their room, Tedzuka picked up his cell phone and stood up.

"Oooh, a girl?" his roommates ribbed him.

"I wish," Tedzuka sighed half-seriously, answering the phone as he left the room. He was headed for the dorms' shared lobby.

"Hello," he said curtly, trying to imply that although he was answering the phone, it didn't mean their relationship had improved.

"You don't have to sound so stiff," said a wry voice. Just as he thought, it was Satoshi. "I heard you're going to Ibaraki to patrol the prefectural art exhibition."

Tedzuka no longer had the will to ask *where* he had heard the information.

"The situation at the Ibaraki libraries is complicated, so be careful. The work that was selected as the exhibition's grand prize winner suggests contempt for the Improvement Act; as a result, the Improvement Committee intends to censor and seize it the moment the exhibition opens. The groups that support the Committee are full of people who won't question the means they use. And the circumstances surrounding the library system there are unique."

"Unique in what way?"

"You'll find out when you go there. Be careful." Without waiting for a response, Satoshi hung up.

"As usual, you ramble on about the stuff you want to say but don't let anyone else get a word in edgewise..."

Tedzuka couldn't stand that he now owed his brother a favor. Especially since he had already heard that the status of Defense Force members in Ibaraki had fallen, and that the chain of command was in major disrepair, from Shibasaki.

"He thinks he knows everything, and that everyone else is dumb as rocks. It makes me sick," Tedzuka said, gulping his beer. He had

been too keyed up to go back to his room, so he had come to Doujou's to complain over a beer or two.

Doujou may have felt unequal to dealing with Tedzuka alone, for Komaki appeared at some point. Tedzuka had already told the two of them all about Satoshi, so he didn't bother to suppress his drunken frustration.

"Defense Force members have a lower status in Ibaraki? Even Shibasaki was able to find out that much. But he was all like, 'Be careful,' like he was telling me a state secret... If we have Shibasaki, we can gather all the information we need! Who needs you, you bastard!"

"Whoa, can't hold your liquor, can you?" Komaki laughed, as Doujou nonchalantly exchanged the alcohol he had set out for something lower-proof.

"Remember, though, Shibasaki isn't an official member," Doujou said. "Depending on our schedules, there may be times when we can't coordinate with her. And you can't deny that the more sources we have, the more sure we can be of the information."

Komaki added, "Also, I think Shibasaki-san just gleefully takes facts and adds them to her collection, even information like that. Though I think her extraordinary curiosity and her ability to explain information are her two biggest weapons."

I know that, Tedzuka wanted to respond sullenly.

A part of his anger came from his frustration at not being more like Shibasaki.

"But I'm surprised--and glad--that you answered when he called your cell phone. You used to be so stubborn that you would only answer if he called the dorm manager's office."

Doujou probably thought nothing of what he was saying, but it stung Tedzuka to hear it.

When he had given Satoshi permission to call his cell phone, he had been thinking that if he established a direct line to his brother, maybe he could lighten Shibasaki's burden a little bit.

Maybe he should have tried to prolong that conversation. Or maybe he should call Satoshi himself and try to get more information from him.

But he could never in a million years bring himself to call his brother and beg, "*Could you please tell me a little more about what we talked about last time?*"

"Should...should I call him back?"

Maybe. Maybe if it were an order. But no sooner had the thought crossed his mind than his superiors were both falling over themselves to disabuse him of the notion.

"We don't want him to think we're hard up for intelligence, after all. I don't see that there's any need for you to call back."

"We also don't know how much of what he tells you is the truth. Based on the Library of Tomorrow Project's objectives, we can't call them an ally of the Library Force, and even their neutrality is suspect. I don't want to believe that a person could do such a thing to his own brother, but we can't discount the possibility that he might pass you misinformation."

Tedzuka hadn't even thought of that, which depressed him even more, and he lost the will to argue.

Politely but firmly declining Doujou and Komaki's offer to walk him back to his room, Tedzuka headed for the lobby, intending to spend the short time before curfew trying to sober up. But when he got there--

"What the hell happened to you? You're completely smashed!"

A piercing voice hit his head like a sonic weapon, though the speaker was only trying to offer her concern. It was Iku.

"...Be quiet. It's like you're driving a spike through my temples."

Iku, who had just bought drinks from the vending machine, came over with her two plastic bottles (maybe one was for Shibasaki?) and sat next to Tedzuka.

"Wow, your eyes are blood-red. You look awful." Iku pressed the curved surface of one of the bottles against his forehead. He opened his mouth to protest--but the coolness of the bottle felt too good to fight.

And when words he had never intended to say aloud fell softly from his mouth, he wanted to believe that it was due entirely to that feeling of comfort.

"I'll never be as good as Shibasaki..."

"Wait, you've got a grudge against *Shibasaki* now?"

I never said 'grudge'! he wanted to say, but Iku had already decided on her own interpretation and was plowing ahead.

"Dammit, I told you before! You've gotta stop thinking you have to be the best at everything! Competing against me, fine, you might have a chance. But against Shibasaki? I think you'd better give up now."

"That's not..." Tedzuka whispered.

He had wanted to try and lighten Shibasaki's load. But when his brother had actually gotten in touch with him, Tedzuka had been so irritated with his arrogance and egotism that he had ended up losing his temper. He couldn't stop thinking about how his brother *still* hadn't said one *word* about their parents, and--and so on.

He couldn't remember what, or how much, he had said. But Iku, who had been quietly holding the bottle above his eyes, suddenly opened her mouth.

"Shibasaki isn't as strong as all that. Don't worry so much--we just have different weaknesses than she does. Shibasaki looks perfect on the outside, but you and I especially need to understand that that's not true, since we're her friends. Like, she'd be scared of a combat situation like any other civilian, while we'd be fine. And there's a lot of stress that comes with being beautiful."

"Am I...friends with you and Shibasaki?"

Tedzuka hadn't been sure what to make of their relationship--sometimes he felt like there was an invisible barrier between them--so Iku's casual acknowledgement took him by surprise and the question popped out. But she took it in stride.

"What are you talking about? After all this time? Lately you and Shibasaki have been thick as thieves. I'm almost starting to get jealous." Iku rose from the sofa. "Well, I better head back. You should hydrate yourself and try and dilute the alcohol a little. Hmmmm...this tea is Shibasaki's, so..." After glancing at the two bottles, Iku handed one of them--hers, apparently--to Tedzuka. "Here you go. See you! Don't you stay too much later either!"

She had even thoughtfully unscrewed the cap before handing it over. Oddly touched by her solicitude, Tedzuka drained the bottle in one gulp...

*

"Huh? Is Tedzuka out today?"

The next day, Iku didn't see Tedzuka in the office, even though he always arrived before she did.

"He took the day off because of a hangover," Komaki answered.

"What!?" Iku yelled. They were scheduled to leave for Ibaraki the next day, and the squads that were going would be doing formation drills and other important training all day. "I told him to get

back to his room before too late!" Iku cried with rare sisterly indignation.

Doujou leveled a hard look at her. "You're pretty flippant for the perpetrator who delivered the finishing blow."

"What? What do you mean, 'delivered the finishing blow!'?"

"What kind of idiot would give someone a sports drink when they're drunk!?"

"Wha--Bu--" Iku gaped in speechless incomprehension.

Komaki took pity on her and explained with a wry smile. "They found Tedzuka collapsed on the lobby floor in the middle of the night; it caused a bit of a ruckus in the men's dorm. They called us down to look after him, and we found a sports drink bottle on the floor next to him. When he was feeling a little better, we asked him, and he said that he drank it after you gave it to him."

"But--I thought you were supposed to hydrate yourself when you get drunk, to dilute the alcohol..."

"And just what do you think happens if you use a liquid that gets absorbed quickly, like a sports drink, idiot?! All that alcohol gets absorbed right along with it and hits you like a truck. Obviously!"

"Whaaaaaaat!? Really!?" Iku's voice rose in surprise.

Komaki scolded Doujou sardonically. "There's no point in getting worked up; it looks like she just didn't know. Kasahara-san, you haven't had much drinking experience, have you?"

"Um, well, I've had glasses of wine or sour cocktails at drinking parties..."

"Well, men are more likely to get drunk and learn the hard way. Usually Tedzuka wouldn't make that kind of mistake, but yesterday he lost his cool a little."

Iku peeked up at Doujou, who was wearing a sour expression. "I'm sorry, I'll try and remember it from now on."

"You bet your ass you will!" His fist descended onto the crown of her head for the first time in a while. Her head rang like a bell.

As Iku sat moping, Komaki gestured to her where Doujou couldn't see. She quietly made her way over to him, and he whispered secretively, "Don't let it get you down. Doujou made the same mistake when we were in the Academy. What's worse, he was in a drinking contest and couldn't back out. He ended up drinking this preposterous mixture of white wine and Pocari Sweat, and did himself in. You've got a talent for making Doujou remember things he'd rather forget."

So part of the reason he was upset was shame over old memories? Iku wondered, sneaking a look at Doujou. In that case--well, she wished he had gone a bit easier on her head, but she *had* done Tedzuka wrong, so she decided to accept it with good grace.

My voice is probably the last thing he wants to hear today, Iku thought, and decided that her apology to Tedzuka could wait until tomorrow.

In the evening, as Tedzuka's headache was fading, the cell phone lying near his pillow rang. The shrill electronic noise was still so piercing to his ears that he snatched it up and answered it without even checking to see who was calling.

"Hello, Tedzuka speaking..." he answered politely, since he didn't know who it was.

"Ah, you sound better. Looks like you'll be able to make the deployment tomorrow after all." It was Shibasaki. "I heard that my roommate committed a terrible blunder. Please forgive her; she didn't do it out of malice."

"I wouldn't believe it if she had!"

"Also, she who lacks both malice and brains tried to tell me what had happened, but I could barely make it out at all." Shibasaki's voice was lower than usual. Perhaps she was taking care not to aggravate Tedzuka's hangover. "But know this: I will never lose to you in an information war. So give up on trying to be as good as me. Know your own limitations."

Tedzuka burst out laughing, then choked back his laughter as it resounded painfully in his head. No one else would ever guess that Shibasaki had called out of kindness.

"Yeah, I got it. I'll never be as good as you. But you like information in and of itself, right?"

"I guess."

"So I'm going to give you all the information that comes my way. I can't gather it like you can, but in any case, I am Tedzuka Satoshi's brother." Their relationship was the source of his most troubling and volatile information. "I may not have your talent, but I've steeled myself for this. Just remember that. I'm going to take on my bastard of a brother in whatever way I can."

And then Tedzuka told her what Satoshi had said during their call. The conversation had been so short that he could almost recite it from memory.

Shibasaki must have found it interesting, for she said, "Thank you. I'll try poking around at Ibaraki some more," and hung up.

In the end, he didn't know whether it had been a sympathy call or not. The ambiguity was Shibasaki all over.

*

Before their departure, Iku sought out Tedzuka. "Um, about the day before yesterday..." she began.

He cut her off sourly. "Forget it. If you had done it on purpose I'd be kicking your ass right now, but I was a moron to drink something you handed to me without checking it first."

"Doesn't that work out to you calling me a moron, in a nasty and paradoxical way!? Why don't you be a good little boy and let me apologize, huh!?"

"That sure as hell doesn't sound like an apology!" he retorted sharply. Iku flinched, and then bowed her head.

"I'm sorry."

"Mm."

They made peace just as the vehicles that would take them to Ibaraki pulled up in front of the main entrance. There were two buses, which could be used as shields when necessary in battle. The Logistical Support Division, making clever use of their limited budget, had fitted the buses with shielding, complete with gunslits, that could be lowered from within.

With only half the Force going, there were plenty of extra seats, so they brought their luggage into the bus with them. Driving duties were split between those Force members who were licensed to drive large vehicles.

"I'm still not feeling one hundred percent, so I'm going to take a nap," Tedzuka announced. "Let me know if anyone wants to trade seats." He headed to the very back of the bus where he could lay down.

Iku boarded the bus; as she tried to decide where to sit, she looked up at the hinged shielding, which was folded up against the ceiling and supported with iron props. She wondered if they would end up using it.

"Nervous?" a voice asked her. It was Doujou; perhaps he was concerned about Iku since it would be the first time she participated in a large-scale battle. Seeing that she was hesitating over where to sit,

he asked, "Do you get carsick?" and looked around for a window seat for her.

"No, not at all! I'd prefer an aisle seat! In fact, I'd prefer an aisle seat next to an occupied window seat!"

It would be all over for her if some acquaintance spotted her at a traffic light once they got to the city. A large vehicle that wasn't a city bus or a sightseeing bus would stand out.

Doujou looked surprised. "Aren't you being a little overcautious? I couldn't imagine that..."

"It's the countryside! That 'unimaginable' coincidence is only too likely! And when we get off the highway, we'll be passing right through my parents' neighborhood!"

She had inquired about their journey ahead of time. Needless to say, she had fallen to her knees when she learned what route they'd be taking.

"Okay, okay!" Doujou said wearily. He flopped down in a window seat and flung his backpack into the empty seat behind him.

"Come on," he urged. Iku stiffened for a moment, clutching her backpack to her chest. Doujou misunderstood the reason for her hesitation. "Of course, if you don't want to, you don't have to." He sounded grouchy about the suggestion, which if she thought about it in a roundabout way...if she thought about it...her thoughts tangled like yarn.

"No, whatever, it's fine! It's not that I don't want to!"

What's he going to think if you're so emphatic!? she thought, her heart pounding, but in the end, she put her bag in the empty seat behind her and sat down next to Doujou.

"Damn, they're getting along for once," Genda said to Komaki, sitting down a few rows back. He tried to get Komaki to join him, but Komaki turned him down.

"Sitting next to you is too oppressive, Commander. You have five times the personal space of a normal human being."

Komaki chose the seat across the aisle from Iku. As soon as he sat down, he tapped out a text message; he was probably telling Marié that they were on their way. *Lucky her*, she thought sincerely, seeing his gentle expression.

As she stared enviously, Doujou asked her, "Where in Ibaraki is your parents' home?"

"Ah, the outskirts of Mito...do you know where the Akatsuka JR station is? It's close to that."

"Sure. I study the geography of every place we're dispatched to." *We have to do that too?* she didn't say aloud, but filed the fact away for the future.

"How long has it been since you've been home?"

Regarding his inexplicable interest in her family with vague distrust, Iku dug through her memories. "I went back every year for New Year's until, hmm...my junior year in college. So it's been four years."

"Aren't you going to meet up with anyone? We have a little free time before the exhibition opens."

"Who would I meet up with?"

"Friends, or siblings...or your father..."

"Oh, no no no no, I couldn't!" Iku's hand flapped vigorously as she waved the suggestion away. "I won't make any careless mistakes that would reveal my job to my parents! While we're there, I've resolved not to set foot outside the neighborhood of the library, modern art museum, and dorm!"

"There's no need to be so stubborn..."

"I don't want to hear about stubbornness from *you* of all people."

"You're right," Komaki interjected, apparently finished texting, "that's a word I wouldn't want to hear from Doujou either."

"Shut up! Stay out of this!"

"Oh, why? Is it something you and Kasahara-san wanted to discuss, just the two of you?" he said suggestively.

Doujou took the bait. "Don't be ridiculous! Of course not!"

His ferocity stung. *And to think I was a little bit glad when he invited me to sit next to him*, she thought resentfully, biting her lip.

"...As I was saying," Doujou continued, his brow wrinkling in distress, "You don't have to tell him that you're in Mito, but if you found a spare minute to call your father, don't you think he'd be happy to hear from you? You don't talk to him enough as it is, am I right?"

This conclusion left Iku blinking in surprise. She didn't understand why Doujou was so concerned about her relationship with her father.

It was true that when her parents had come to visit her at the Musashino First Library, her mother had been as overprotective and patronizing as usual, while her father had treated her a little differently. His signals had been very mixed, but she thought that maybe he recognized her as a productive member of society, with her own job. And because of that, their parting had been remarkably civil.

But there was no way that Doujou would know about--

"...Instructor Doujou, when my parents came, did you and my father talk about anything?"

"No, not really. Maybe the weather?" Doujou avoided her eyes. He wasn't very good at lying.

"Liar! You *definitely* talked about something!"

"I'm not lying!"

Before they became locked in an am-not-are-too quarrel, Komaki intervened. "Please be a little more quiet, you two," he said mildly. Some of the Force members were napping to conserve their energy. Genda sounded like he'd be snoring loudly soon.

"Why are you so concerned about my relationship with my parents anyway?" she asked in a lower voice.

Doujou was at a loss. "Well..."

"It's his point of view as someone a little older, I think." Komaki had come to his rescue. "It's all well and good to stand up to your parents when you're in your mid-twenties, but when you're approaching thirty like we are...well, you start to feel a lot more resigned to any friction. Your parents have been the way they are for years and years, and you can't just tell them to change their ways now."

"...Instructor Komaki, I've never heard that your relationship with your family was anything less than amicable."

"It is amicable, and I'm lucky for it. But that doesn't mean there's never any friction, or that we don't get irritated with each other from time to time. I'm just speaking generally here."

Doujou was nodding along in agreement, having accepted his rescue with undisguised relief. It was a little hard to stomach, but Komaki's arguments were valid in any case.

"Your problems with your parents aren't severe, like Tedzuka's outright antagonism with his brother--I think if one of you said the right thing at the right time, things could get a lot better. For us as your elders, the urge to intervene is almost irresistible."

Faced with the example of Tedzuka and his brother, Iku felt too disheartened to argue.

Just then, Komaki's phone vibrated. "Sorry, excuse me," Komaki said, leaving the conversation. Marié had probably sent a response.

Having been abandoned by his rescuer, Doujou scratched his head in dismay and continued Komaki's line of reasoning. "There comes a time when you've got to compromise. Usually it comes along

on its own, though. The more you avoid your parents, the more I worry that you're going to miss that opportunity... You're their precious little girl, so just give them a call once in a while, at least."

"D-Don't call me a little girl! This year is my third year with the Force, and I'm already twenty-five, whether I can believe it or not!"

Frankly, it had unsettled her to hear Doujou call her a 'little girl.'

"Oh? Next month I'll be turning thirty. But my parents still treat me like a little boy. Letting your parents treat you like a child is part of filial piety," Doujou said with a philosophical attitude that Iku could never match. She envied his equanimity.

"Mommy never--" Iku faltered. She had let her emotions get the better of her. She continued, less brashly. "My mother never wanted a daughter like me. She would have preferred a feminine, obedient little girl who looked good in a fluttery dress."

Doujou looked out the window and smiled sardonically. "All I hear is a little girl pouting."

"I'm not pouting! And stop calling me a little girl!"

"In this day and age, I can't just say that no parent would ever hate their child. But in your case, I can guarantee this: you are loved, even if your mother is a bit obnoxious about it."

--Oh. He just told me I'm loved.

She was struck speechless by the word, one she had never thought she would hear from Doujou's mouth. Next to her, Doujou's face was turned toward the window, but his ears were bright red.

"I'm going to sleep!" he announced unilaterally. He crossed his arms and leaned his head against the window, twisting his neck at an unnatural angle, and tried to get comfortable.

*

Sometime during the trip, which was punctuated only by a bathroom break, Iku fell asleep. It was Doujou's voice that woke her.

"We just got off at the Mito exit."

When she opened her eyes and discovered that she had snuggled into Doujou's shoulder as she slept, it was all she could do to keep from screaming. She recoiled as though he were on fire.

"I-I'm so sorry, how long was I...?"

"I don't know, I was sleeping too for most of it." His nonchalant attitude and disinterested tone somehow just made her feel worse.

As they moved onto city streets, Doujou asked her suddenly, "What's it like being back in the countryside after four years?"

Since she had been sitting there feeling stiff and awkward, she seized upon the topic gratefully. Trying to ignore Doujou's presence, she gazed out the window. Somewhere within the unpretentious residential area that spread out beyond their window was Iku's parents' house.

"...Nostalgic. There's the gas station where we would stop for gas before we went on drives. Oh, if you go left on this street, you get to the library. I used to go there all the time when I was in elementary school. But there's a lot of new shops too, like convenience stores. -- Damn, they put it a big Tsutaya¹⁸!"

As she compared her memories with the present reality, she was reminded of the medium-sized bookshop where she had been saved by her prince.

"I used to buy a lot of books at a bookshop near my high school..." she said, peeking at Doujou. She thought that he looked a little nostalgic too--but that was probably just because she knew that he was her prince.

She felt like Urashima Tarou¹⁹, coming home to her town after four years. Their destination, the Prefectural Library on the shore of Lake Senba, was near Iku's high school, so she had some memory of it, but they were driving on streets that were less and less familiar to Iku, with convenience stores glaring at each other across the street. But their path to the Prefectural Library followed the big streets, and Iku could trace their route in her mind.

When Iku had last seen the Prefectural Library, it had been three years since its move to its new building. It had a classical design to complement the Modern Art Museum's elegant brick facade, but Iku remembered that its bricks had still been too new and bright to match its neighbor--though it had more than enough basement levels to make the museum jealous.

Around the same time, a large concrete structure had been constructed on the lake shore. She understood now that it was meant

¹⁸ A chain of rental shops and bookstores.

¹⁹ From Wikipedia: "Urashima Tarou is a Japanese legend about a fisherman who rescues a turtle and is rewarded for this with a visit to the palace of the Dragon God, under the sea. He stays there for three days and, upon his return to his village, finds himself 300 years in the future." Similar to the American story of Rip van Winkle.

to stand in for a Library Base; there were several others outside of Mito as well.

In the Tokyo metro area, one Library Base was sufficient for the mobilization and housing of the city's Force members, but that approach didn't work in larger prefectures. Obviously, for efficiency's sake, the Improvement Committee left the small mountain villages alone, but cities and towns of a certain size needed a "quasi-base" if they wanted to be able to resist censorship for long. This--the ability to construct and outfit local facilities--was another reason why it had made sense to centralize the budget of the Library Force, though its branches were kept under local administration.

For most of their drive toward Lake Senba, the scenery continued to inspire nothing but nostalgia.

Nostalgia changed to misgiving after the Prefectural Library and the Museum of Modern Art came into view.

They had expected an ugly scene, and they were not disappointed.

There were vehicles parked all over the Modern Art Museum's grounds belonging to groups that supported the Improvement Act, and its low brick wall was already scarred by stone-throwing. What little glass was left in its windows was hanging on pitifully to strips of packing tape. The volume of the protest's speech-making was near the level of harassment.

"Are we going to have a battle before we even walk in the door?" Genda muttered, making the whole company tense. If he gave an order, they would have to coordinate with the others by radio.

The spectacle at the Prefectural Library was much the same. The arrival of reinforcements would surely be a relief to the staff.

As they approached, a group of people came running out of the library.

The group was dressed in plain clothes, not combat uniforms, so they knew it couldn't be the Defense Force coming to meet them. It included people of every age, from minors to the elderly, so apparently it wasn't the library's staff either.

A middle-aged man knocked on the door of the first bus, which had driven into the library's parking lot.

"Are you the Kantou Library Task Force? Please disembark!"

"What's all this fuss about?" Genda asked, exiting.

The man quailed for a moment, perhaps overwhelmed by Genda's physical presence, but then he regained his voice. "You folks are carrying weapons, yes? I must ask you to hand them over!"

Genda's expression turned dangerous in an instant. "We are in possession of weapons, which we obtained permission to carry within the premises of the Prefectural Library and the Museum of Modern Art after going through all the proper procedures. If you like, I can show you the permit we were granted by Ibaraki Prefecture. Who are you to demand that we hand over weapons we are legally authorized to carry?"

"We are a pacifist group, who fight censorship without resorting to weapons! As citizens of this town, we are here to protest the presence of the Kantou Library Force's weapons in our library!"

The group's name was "The Society for Nonresistance," and it took almost an hour of arguing with them before the Task Force could disembark from their buses.

"Maybe you aren't aware, but all of the Improvement Act advocate groups that have descended upon your library are famous for their questionable methods! What's more, their members have been arrested in Tokyo numerous times for violating the Swords and Firearms Control Law! To ask us to give up our weapons and go up against those guys unarmed is crazy talk! Do you want to just sit back and expose this year's prize-winning work to the brutality of those bastards and the censorship of the Improvement Act!?"

A man with thinning hair named Takemura had been the first to reach them; he was apparently the society's president. "Fighting violence with violence will just make the situation worse! If you follow the path of peaceful debate, it's possible you can come to a mutual understanding!"

"So you've been 'following the path of peaceful debate' with those thugs, have you!?"

Genda's angry words silenced Takemura. Those "thugs" who supported the Improvement Act had reduced the museum and the library to their present state of chaos in a little under a week, after all. And that was *without* weapons.

Genda pressed on. "And I presumed that you made sure that *they* weren't carrying weapons!?"

Takemura's head snapped up. "We'd never be able to open a dialog if we began by accusing them of carrying weapons! But with

you, and the Ibaraki Defense Force, there's no doubt! If you gave up your weapons first, I'm sure it would make an impression on the other side..."

"Oh, I'm *sure*! Save the sleep-talking for when your eyes are shut!" Genda ended the discussion and turned to his troops.

"Everyone, back on board! We're heading to the branch base! We'll get the lay of the land afterward!"

All twenty-four members silently moved to obey this crisp command.

The bus was buzzing like a hornet's nest even during the short drive to the branch base. The most common sentiment seemed to be "What the hell was that!?", but there were too many others to count. *Why were they the first to greet us? What happened to the library staff? What the hell is the Defense Force doing? Are those sheeplike pacifists not worried that those thugs might take censorship into their own hands?*

"I bet this is what my brother was talking about when he said the situation here was 'complicated,'" Tedzuka said, completely recovered after his nap.

Out of the other members of the squad, only Iku didn't know what he was talking about, but she had information to share as well. "Shibasaki was telling me too that the Ibaraki library world has a 'noticeable bias'; I wonder if this was what she meant. The Ibaraki Prefectural Library is the library attached to the branch base, right? And usually there's a system of cooperation set up between a base and its library, but here...maybe it's because groups like that one we just met have wormed their way into the library...?"

"We don't know what the situation at the base is either," Genda said, looking unusually grim. "All right, as soon as we get to the base and arrange for a room, we're having a meeting. Doujou, you and your squad will disclose your information to the rest of the Task Force. You can be vague about your sources."

"Yes, sir." Doujou saluted, and began to speak with Tedzuka and Iku.

Their buses were waved into the base without inspection, but there was no sign of excitement at the arrival of reinforcements--just a disinterested contingent of Defense Force members guiding them through the base to where they could park their buses. It was an inconceivably cold reception, given that they had been called in

because the Defense Force was too weak to maintain a chain of command.

"Who should we give our weapons to for safekeeping?" Genda asked the Defense Force members.

They exchanged pained glances, then one of them answered, pulling down the brim of his hat. "We'll give you a key to the third warehouse, and be much obliged if you took care of the safekeeping and maintenance of your weapons yourselves."

"You begged for reinforcements, so we schlepped our weapons all the way from Tokyo, and now you won't even lift a finger to help service or store them!?" Genda roared, until Doujou pushed him back.

Komaki turned to the man instead. "...Are you advising us that our weapons would be safer under our protection?"

As a younger man, Komaki played an effective good cop to Genda's bad cop. The officer with his cap pulled down answered him awkwardly. "We will take complete responsibility for the maintenance of your vehicles, and provide you with any and all materials you require for the maintenance of your weapons."

That was to be their answer. Komaki silently accepted the warehouse key from the man.

As he took the key from Komaki's hand, Genda looked up at the walls of the base. "What the hell kind of ghost is haunting this place?" he spat rudely.

*

The first person Genda met with was the branch commander of the Mito Branch Library Base, where they would be staying. (The highest position at branch bases other than the Kantou Library Base was branch commander, not base commander.) Doujou and Komaki accompanied him to keep him from getting too out of hand.

The branch commander of the Mito Branch Library Base was a man in his fifties named Yokota. *Urbane*, one would call him, if one were being kind; *spineless*, if one were not. He was a Library Supervisor Second Class, the minimum rank required to serve as branch commander.

"I require an explanation," Genda said, belligerent in spite of his two tamers. "Half the Library Task Force came up all the way from Tokyo in response to your pleas for assistance. In spite of that, at the Prefectural Library we were badgered by some hare-brained group to

give up our weapons or some such nonsense, and at the branch base we asked for weapons maintenance and they refused us."

Next to him, Komaki smoothly took up his line of thought. "The Task Force have all been wondering why were summoned here as reinforcements, and we're at a loss. We weren't expecting a ticker-tape parade when we arrived, but we were hoping for more cooperation and goodwill from our soon-to-be teammates."

Supervisor Yokota listened to their grievances with an agonized expression.

Then he lowered his head apologetically. "I'm sorry. Over the past few years, the library situation in this prefecture has become polarized, ever since Library Supervisor Special Class Sugahara took up her post as the director of the Prefectural Library."

Director Sugahara was a member and special advisor to the Society for Nonresistance, the group that had just quarreled with the Force. It hadn't taken long before the Society had wormed its way into the operation of the library, as a citizen group.

"And as a result, a hierarchy based on occupation has developed, at least at the Mito branch base. Defense Force members--as combatants--are at the bottom of that totem pole, and Director Sugahara, the librarians, and the Society for Nonresistance rule the library sphere around Mito. Nowadays, the Defense Force can't carry weapons without the permission of the director or the Administrative Division; and the Improvement Special Agency can censor and seize our books to their hearts' content. The same phenomenon has spread to all libraries under Mito's jurisdiction."

Apparently when the Improvement Special Agency came to seize books, the librarians and the Society for Nonresistance fought back by chanting slogans, but it didn't seem to have any effect on their opponents. The librarians' picket line blocked them from entering the archives, but it didn't stop them from plundering every other book in the library. And the Defense Force didn't have much luck holding them up unarmed.

"Of course not!" Genda snarled, unable to contain himself any longer. --At least, he probably intended to snarl; it came out as a roar. "Why is this situation tolerated!?"

"Who knows," said Yokota, with that wan smile peculiar to people for whom giving up has become a habit. "Since I'm only a Library Supervisor Second Class, and a Defense Force member, I apparently don't have the right to argue with the director, a Library Supervisor

Special Class, on equal ground. I've tried to appeal to Commander Inamine in Tokyo, but all of the library directors within Mito's jurisdiction have fallen in line with the Society for Nonresistance, and no matter where I try to send my statements, they always end up shelved."

"Does that faction by any chance have control over personnel and general business affairs?" Doujou asked.

Yokota nodded silently. "I won't make excuses." Meaning that if he had sent his appeals directly to Inamine's address, they would not have reached him. If an intervention from headquarters went well, fine, but if it went poorly--at Yokota's age, he probably had a family, and loans to pay off, and 50-odd was too young to be put out to pasture.

Inamine would never have tolerated the situation at Mito. But the reason they believed that without reservation was because they knew Inamine personally. It would be hard to inspire the same belief in a lowly, faraway Library Supervisor Second Class who only knew his position and his rank.

"But this time, it's not just the library that's in trouble."

The art exhibition that the library co-hosted with the modern art museum was also in danger.

"There have been some big clashes between the Improvement Act and the Modern Art Museum; enough to make them choose that explosive work as this year's winning piece. They knew that the Improvement Committee would try to suppress it by any means necessary; they knew that this peaceful cultural sanctuary would become a battlefield. But they chose that confrontational piece, almost as if to lash out at the status quo. They wanted to recognize the value of aggressively rejecting censorship and longing for freedom."

The spirit of the work had been obvious even as a color copy: anger and outrage at unjust censorship, and the sky-blue hope that came with fighting against it.

"But Director Sugahara and the rest of the Society for Nonresistance are trying to weather the coming storm in accordance with pacifist principles. They might as well be directly cooperating with the Improvement Committee, who want to wipe that particular piece from the face of the earth."

Yokota's habitual expression of defeat broke for the first time, as his eyes glittered with determination.

"The Museum of Modern Art begged us for help, and we appealed to the Library Task Force for reinforcements to give us a boost. Over these past few years, we've lost our fangs--to the point that it's doubtful whether we could establish a strong enough chain of command for a large-scale battle."

Genda and the others had been planning to censure Yokota for the deplorable conditions at the library, but the words died in their throats. They understood now that it had been all he could do to call the Library Task Force.

"...I understand the situation perfectly," Genda said to Yokota, who had covered his face with his hand. "We'll need everything you've got."

They could see what they were fighting against now. To Yokota, who had mustered all the courage he could in his position, there was no longer anything more to say.

At the Library Task Force all-hands meeting, they revealed what Yokota had told them. The information from Tedzuka's brother and Shibasaki simply reinforced what they knew, so there was no need to bring it up.

"First of all, we'll put in an emergency call to Commander Inamine and get him to quash this ludicrous local rule about the Defense Force needing the librarians' permission to carry weapons. If the order comes from the top, the rule should be abolished sometime tomorrow. I'm giving Aoki's squad the task of creating a chain of command today. The other squads will come up with the training regimes that will let us use the time before the exhibition opens most efficiently."

Voices rose in complaint.

"The Force members here probably haven't done any marksmanship practice in years--who knows if they still remember how to hit a target?"

"It might be too late for formation training...the exhibition's in less than two weeks."

"Well, think of something!" Genda shouted desperately. "You're the Library Task Force, for god's sake! I'm going to get the rest of the Force out here too, so put your damn heads together and make it work!"

After the meeting was over, Doujou anxiously approached Genda. "You still haven't gone to greet the Prefectural Library director."

"And it can stay that way," Genda declared coolly. "She sounds like an old bat with a face like a giant Buddha. I don't want to see that."

"Surely you can't mean that. Despite everything, she's still the highest-ranking officer in the prefecture."

"When we put the kibosh on her bizarre local rules, she'll understand that we can't be controlled like the others. And we'll let her worry about what'll happen now that headquarters has found out about her rules. But I will go meet with the staff of the Museum of Modern Art. We have battle formations to discuss."

*

The staff at the Museum of Modern Art were generally much more receptive. In fact, they were up in arms over the refusal of the Prefectural Library director and the Society for Nonresistance to deploy the Defense Force while the museum was under fire. "Why does the Library Force *have* a Defense Force, if not for this?" grumbled the museum director, and none of the Task Force members could answer him. (Genda had brought the same team to this meeting.)

The museum director, Fuchigami, was thinking about placing the prizewinning work outside during the exhibition.

"If we put it inside and those who want to destroy it get in, they'll probably cause a great deal of damage to the museum's facilities and other exhibits. We can repair the building, but works of art aren't something you can just replace or repair."

It was a reasonable position for an art museum to take.

"*Freedom* may be this year's best work--we were on the selection committee, in fact." Fuchigami gave Genda a piercing look. "But at the same time, *Freedom* has brought great misfortune down upon the exhibition. We must have the same care toward our permanent exhibits and the other works at the exhibition. We cannot display *Freedom* inside the museum."

"That makes perfect sense," Genda nodded. *Freedom* was a large-scale work, so it would be an easy target. It would stand out even inside the museum, and if their opponents shot at it from a long way away, many other works would suffer collateral damage. "What are your thoughts on how you'll exhibit it outside?"

"We'll put it well away from the other outside exhibits. Also, we've managed to get our hands on a case made of bulletproof glass-- not a very strong one, but..."

But they had obviously done their best. The Museum of Modern Art had carried out all of its appointed duties. Now the Library Force needed to catch up.

After the arrangements had been made, they went to the branch base to see about lodging. Doujou stopped Iku as they were entering the building.

"Be careful."

Perhaps he didn't want to be overheard, because he grabbed Iku's collar and put his lips up next to her ear. *Wait, should we talk about this first--* she thought for a panicked moment before stooping down so that she was at Doujou's level.

"This strange hierarchy is alive and well within the base as well. The men will be fine since there are so many of us, but you'll be alone. Observe the situation carefully and avoid trouble."

Her throat was too dry to answer, so she settled for nodding vigorously instead. She was still nodding when he walked away toward the men's dorm where the others were waiting, turning once to say "If anything comes up, give me a call." Punctilious to the end.

Iku waved goodbye awkwardly, then headed toward the dorm manager's office herself. Dorm managers all over seemed to share the same indifferent attitude, and this one was no exception. Iku was taken briskly through the formalities and handed a key and a map to the room where she would be staying. It was on the first floor, in the back. *Lucky me, it's near the laundry room and the baths,* she gloated as she walked down the hall--

And noticed a strange undercurrent pervading the dorm. Iku had had plenty of experience with that feeling during her inquest, so her senses were highly attuned to it.

There were women who walked by who were boisterous and lively, the way one would expect in a women's dorm--and then there were those who avoided them--no, made way for them, hugging the walls of the corridors as they passed.

She soon figured out that the lively ones were the librarians, and the ones cowering against the walls were the Defense Force members.

Yuck, this gives me the creeps, Iku shuddered. But since she had been ordered to "observe the situation carefully and avoid trouble," Iku too stuck to the edges of the hallway until she reached her room.

It was probably a guest room, for the futon was in good shape but the rest of the room was dreary, with only a triptych mirror, a wastebasket, and a small desk for furniture. She set down her bag, and then since it was dinnertime, headed to the mess hall.

When she got in line as usual, waiting for her turn at the counter, a brushfire of hostile whispers ignited all around her, loud enough for her to overhear. "...Hey!" "What does she think she's doing?"

Finally,

"What are you doing here?" the girl behind her pressed her directly.

"What...? I'm with the Library Task Force; we came up from Tokyo to support the Defense Force...?"

One hundred and seventy centimeters of Kasahara Iku turned swiftly to face the girl who had addressed her. She quailed briefly, but shook off her hesitation. "Look here--" she began, when--

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" Another girl waded into the fray. She wasn't quite as tall as Iku, but she was about the same height as Doujou. Her glasses sat a little crooked on her short nose, perhaps due to the haste with which she had interposed herself. "I'm sorry, I didn't get a chance to talk to our guest...I'm so sorry, I'll explain the matter right now!"

With that, the girl grabbed Iku's arm and dragged her out of the mess hall. Iku didn't know what was going on, so she let the stranger have her way. This turn of events probably also fell under Doujou's order to "observed the situation carefully and avoid trouble."

The girl, who had led Iku to a shadowy, sparsely-populated area, was muttering, "What should I...? Where should we...?" and appeared to be searching for a place where they could talk.

"I've already been given a room to stay in; how about there?" Iku suggested. "No one else is there."

The girl with glasses said, "I'm sorry," but Iku guessed that this meant she accepted. *This girl sure apologizes a lot more than she needs to,* Iku thought as they headed for her room.

"Um, nice to meet you, I'm Nonomiya Shizuka, of the Defense Force of the Mito Headquarters of the Ibaraki Prefecture branch of the

Kantou Library Force. I've been instructed to act as your guide during your stay with the Defense Force."

Iku, who had been in the middle of opening a bottle, cocked her head. "I never..." *introduced myself*, Iku began to say, but Nonomiya leaned toward her with a gleam in her eye.

"You're Kasahara Iku of the Tokyo metropolitan area branch of the Kantou Library Force, right!? The first woman to join the Library Task Force? Every girl in the Defense Force here knows who you are!"

Oh, right, I'm kinda famous. When she was at the Kantou Library Base, where the Library Task Force was based, it was liable to completely slip her mind.

"The Administrative Division gets to eat dinner first. Defense Force members can't go into the mess hall until usually about an hour after it opens...same for the baths. Also, if two people want to use the laundry machines at the same time, the members of the Administrative Division get precedence. The Logistical Support Division isn't persecuted as much as the the Defense Force, but they also let the Administrative Division go first."

Iku's mouth fell open. "What kind of bullshit local rule is that!? Disgusting!" She drew down her eyebrows.

Nonomiya's shoulders bowed. "It's only fair...we're the Defense Force, yet we're so useless that we can't even defend our books from censorship."

"Cause the director, or the librarians, or whoever, won't give you permission to carry guns, right!? How the hell are you supposed to fight armed opponents with your bare hands!? Form a human shield and get mowed down!?" Truly angry now, Iku's voice went rough. And Nonomiya shrank even smaller. *Ohhh, I remember that feeling. The feeling of your shoulders bowing as you try to stand up to unreasonable pressure.* A year ago, it had taken all Iku had to keep her shoulders straight under the relentless pressure to bend.

But the Defense Force members here had been living with the unreasonable pressure, day in and day out, for years already.

"Sorry for yelling. It just pisses me off how unfair it all is. In situations like this, girls play way more dirty than boys."

Nonomiya gave her a pained smiled and didn't answer. Unlike Iku, who would be making her getaway when the exhibition was over, Nonomiya would still be stuck. She wasn't in a position to nod along with what Iku was saying.

"I've been ordered to accompany and help you as much as possible while we're in the dorm. I look forward to working with you until the exhibition ends."

"Likewise. I don't have a clue how things in this dorm work; you've already saved me once, when you pulled me out of the mess hall. Even if it's just for a short time, I hope we can become friends." Iku stuck out her hand. Nonomiya took it timidly, and Iku shook with a firm grip, eliciting a real smile from Nonomiya at last.

They decided that it would be best to share a room while Iku was around, so they went to Nonomiya's room to collect her futon and other necessities. Nonomiya's roommate, another Defense Force girl, wanted to shake her hand too.

There were just twelve female Defense Force members in the dorm, and they were all assigned rooms together. There were more than a hundred women total in the dorm; it was quite a lopsided ratio. Of course the percentage of women in the Defense Force was small no matter where one went, but a dozen members out of a hundred was just too imbalanced.

"What about the men? Are there more Defense Force members than librarians?"

"Um, yes, I believe it's about a 50-50 split..." Nonomiya's voice drifted down as she carried her futon down the stairs. "Reinforcements have come from other libraries within our jurisdiction, so there are about a hundred gathered here."

A hundred was a lot, but this library had been shackled by the strange principles of "nonresistance" for a long time.

Maybe it's too late to retrain everybody.

It wasn't something Iku should be worried about, but unease crept through her mind anyway.

Nonomiya's roommate pitched in to help move her things, and by the time they were done, it was the hour when the Defense Force members could use the mess hall. The three ate together, and while they were at it, taught Iku what she needed to know about living in the dorm as a Defense Force member without ruffling feathers. They kept her company until lights-out.

By the end, as one might expect from a group of girls, they were chatting like old friends.

"Really? You're from Ibaraki originally, Kasahara-san!?"

"Yeah. I went to First, so we weren't at the same high school, but I'm pretty sure I graduated the same year as you two."

"Wow, that makes me so happy!" Nonomiya and her friend exchanged excited looks. "Did you go to Tokyo because you were gunning for a spot on the Task Force from the start?"

"No way! No one was more surprised than me when I got picked. My parents are really conservative--I don't think they'd have given their blessing for a girl to go into a combat position, and they're really interfering, so I used college as an excuse to move out. It would make a much more interesting story if I had been aspiring to join the Task Force from the beginning, but I wasn't."

"Still, it just makes me swell with hometown pride to know that the first female Task Force member is from my city!"

It's really not that big a... Iku thought, but the other girls' eyes were actually twinkling as they gazed up at her. Like they were looking at an admired elder, rather than someone their own age.

The conversation kept them up an hour past curfew. The time passed by in a flash.

*

The next day, the remaining half of the Task Force arrived, along with a top-down order from Inamine repealing the Mito branch's unorthodox rule about the Defense Force needing the director's and librarians' permission to carry weapons.

Genda chose that time to go and pay his respects to Sugahara Akiko, director of the Prefectural Library.

"It's in poor taste," Doujou and Komaki had said, their shoulders slumping as they accompanied Genda to the meeting. They had no one else to push the task off onto, since their only underlings were the too-green Tedzuka and Iku.

Genda's description of the director as an "old bat with a face like a giant Buddha" proved to be astonishingly accurate. Komaki nearly exploded from trying to hold in his laughter as they entered her office.

"I'm Library Supervisor Third Class Genda Ryuusuke, commander of the Library Task Force. I came to deliver my greetings; beg your pardon for not coming by before now."

Genda bowed, and Director Sugahara turned white--she must have already seen Inamine's orders.

"How do you do. I had been told that Inamine was a fair man, but he turns out to be a surprisingly uncompromising one."

"If we were to investigate the way you twisted and exploited the right of the Defense Force to carry weapons, which is guaranteed by the enforcement orders of the Library Laws, I'm sure it would be very inconvenient for you. Perhaps you should hold your tongue."

Sugahara's plump cheeks turned even paler.

"The matter of a group not belonging to the Library Force meddling in the Force's decisions is also very concerning. Yesterday, upon our arrival, that same group ordered us to surrender our weapons. Was it you who gave them permission to do so?"

"No, I did not give them permission to do something like that!" Sugahara shouted hysterically.

Genda scowled. *"This is why I hate dealing with dames,"* was clearly on the tip of his tongue. But if he said it aloud, it might be used against him later. His subordinates' warnings before the meeting had done their job.

"The Society for Nonresistance is a respectable citizen group with noble ideals! Their demands must have been an attempt to persuade you or teach you the meaning of nonresistance!"

"Oh, it sounded far too high-handed for that."

The frightening expression on Genda's face might have been called a smile, but it was a smile that would make anyone think twice about crossing him.

"In any case, there's still the matter of the deterioration of the fighting skills of the Mito Defense Force. If this had been any other prefecture, half of the Task Force would have been sufficient reinforcement, without a doubt. But we've deployed the entire Task Force for this assignment. Do you understand the significance of this?"

By this time, the quivering Sugahara resembled a giant Buddha that had been painted pure white. Genda continued with a conspicuously sadistic expression.

"It means that the Ibaraki prefectural art exhibition has become a conflict on the same level as the Battle for the Museum of Information History. If the Mito Defense Force had been doing proper training every day, we would have been able to get away with only sending half the Force. Meaning that during your tenure, you have created a situation so untenable that it requires the entire Library Task Force to get it under control. If you return to the prefectural

government after this, I'd be very interested to know how much they value you then."

According to the information Shibasaki had dug up and sent along, Sugahara had been appointed director by the personnel office of the prefectural government, and had been conservative to the point of absurdity in managing the library. "Conservative" in this case meant attempting to minimize human casualties from censorship raids. Sugahara had been trying to prevent any scandalous incidents for which she might have to accept blame, so that she could return to the prefectural government after her tenure.

From what they had heard, women of Sugahara's generation had been steadily promoted through the ranks of the prefectural government while she had been languishing at the Ibaraki Prefectural Library.

"It's not always right to counter violence with violence! Pacifism is a very laudable form of resistance! I've just been communicating with and listening to the voices of my citizens, as I should!"

"One group of your citizens. And your relationship with them is about one step away from secret collusion. And another thing," Genda continued. "I don't dispute that pacifism is a noble philosophy. But I believe it only works when policy-makers are susceptible to humanitarian impulses. It should be obvious whether or not this is true for the Media Improvement Committee. For now, I'd be very interested to see the data on how many books this library was able to protect from censorship before and after you took up your post. I'm guessing those numbers will be needed after this art exhibition is over."

Implying that there would be an investigation into Sugahara's effectiveness as library director. Probably not only from the Kantou Library Force, but from the prefectural government as well.

"One more thing. It's come to my attention that a corrupt system has developed at the branch base. I'll be reporting this back to the Force as well, as evidence for their case. ...Along with your practice of not giving the branch base commander, as a Library Supervisor Second Class in the Defense Force, equal standing with you in disagreements, of course."

As Genda and the others left the room, Sugahara's plump form was shivering, as if all the blood had drained from her body.

As soon as the rest of the Task Force arrived, they split into two groups--one for marksmanship practice and one for formation practice--and lead the Mito Defense Force in special training exercises.

Though the Defense Force had been forbidden to use guns even for training purposes, they had continued to exercise and train in the martial arts. However, the widespread deterioration of their marksmanship skills could not be denied.

"Be honest--what level will we be able to bring them up to?" Genda asked Shindou, the sharpshooter who was overseeing the marksmanship training. The concrete-walled room rang with lively gunfire.

It was the only thing lively about the room. Shindou pursed his lips and frowned. "It depends on their individual skills, but...on average, up to Kasahara's level."

Everyone present raised their eyes to the heavens--with one exception.

"Hey! What the hell! Why does every single one of you look so discouraged!?" cried Iku, who happened to poke her head into their meeting.

"Do you need us to explain it to you?" Doujou retorted calmly.

Iku muttered to herself under her breath, but left them alone.

"Do you mean Kasahara's level when she enlisted, or now?" Genda asked.

Shindou looked at the table of results. "Now...I guess."

"Good, we'll be able to get some use out of them at least. Keep them practicing until they piss blood."

Shindou nodded silently at Genda's ruthless order. There were only ten days left until the exhibition opened. They would be fighting not only the Improvement Special Agency, but all the groups who supported the Improvement Act, who had probably smuggled in weapons of their own. The police wouldn't bother to search them--as usual--so a scenario where the Act's supporters got their hands dirty was all too believable.

But it was the job of the Library Task Force to come up with a battle plan for every possible scenario. The Mito Defense Force had their hands full just working under and maintaining the chain of command that had been set up.

"You know, we're incredibly lucky," Iku murmured to Tedzuka as they went to buy something to drink during their break. She was conscious as she had never been before how reassuring it was to be

able to fight alongside comrades as a seamless team, and how thankful she was for it. Day after day of training together had gone into building that solidarity, and she couldn't help but be angry when she thought about the anguish and frustration of the Mito Defense Force, whose own training regime had been so suddenly shattered.

"It's because we have Inamine as a leader," Tedzuka replied, serious as always. "How are things going on your side of the dorm?" Behind the question was probably the concern of quite a few people.

"Hmm, the Defense Force girls get kinda pushed around. Like, they can only have dinner and use the baths after the Administrative Division is done."

Though the current library director's local rules had been repealed, the spirit of the old law would probably still linger unpleasantly. Iku didn't want to think that Nonomiya and the other Defense Force girls would turn around and start bullying their former tormentors, but the antagonism between the two divisions would probably last for a long time. Iku had undergone her ostracism alone, so it had started and ended with her, but at Mito the bonds of trust throughout the entire Force had been warped and broken. It wasn't the kind of thing that could be fixed with a shallow "Sorry" and "It's okay."

"I wonder if the prefecture's gonna be filled with weird factions like that for a long time..."

"Maybe. But it's not our place to get involved," Tedzuka told her, and Iku nodded silently. Still, her heart ached when she thought about Nonomiya and her roommate.

As they returned from their errand, they were walking along a path on the base's grounds when they found a greenhouse.

"C'mon, let's have our drinks in there. The wind is cold but it should be warm inside."

The sweat from their exertions during drills had evaporated, and Northern Kantou was chilly in November. Tedzuka went along with her plan to warm up without protest.

"Wow, one thin little sheet of plastic sure makes a big difference!" Iku whistled. "Ooh, there are still a lot of autumn flowers!"

Iku flitted around the greenhouse drinking her sports drink. "You're not going to get much of a rest if you can't sit still," Tedzuka admonished her.

"Yeah, yeah," Iku said, making her way to a corner of the greenhouse to sit, when an autumn-planted cluster of bright green stems arrested her eye.

Iku sat down next to Tedzuka. It was the only plant she looked at for the rest of the break.

*

During Iku's stay at the dorm, the other Defense Force girls had for some reason started following her around like ducklings.

It made her blush to think of her status among them, but she could understand that they admired her, and that it was reassuring to stay near her as they began their full-blown training regimen.

Of course, the girls in the Administrative Division did not regard her with particular favor.

Ladies, you're gonna be in for a world of hurt if you stick too close to that library director, she thought--but of course, their relationship wasn't anywhere near warm enough that she could give them this friendly advice.

"Peed any blood?"

"Not yet!"

"Commander Genda isn't going to go any easier on you because you're women, so get on that!"

As they warmed their bodies in the bath, their conversation on that indelicate topic was equally heated.

"But my bones feel like they're coming apart..."

"It's 'cause we haven't done this kind of hard training in ages..."

Suggesting that until now they had been too timid to take the time they needed for proper training.

"I gotta take in my laundry after I get out of the bath."

They would hang the uniforms they had worn that day on the clotheslines on the roof and let them dry overnight, then take them in the next evening. Iku's laundry duties were especially rigorous, as she had only brought two uniforms. She had to do laundry every day if she wanted her clothes to be ready for the next day.

"It would be so much easier if we could use the new machines."

The dorm had many laundry machines for the use of its residents, even the latest model of dryer, but naturally the Defense Force wasn't allowed to use them.

"I mean, any way you look at it, you guys in the Defense Force need to do more laundry than they do." By this point there were only Defense Force members left in the baths, so Iku felt free to speak her mind.

"We're used to it," Nonomiya said in a small voice, and the rest of the girls remained silent. Iku realized at that moment that their vulnerability came from the fact that she was an outsider.

"Can we ask you for marksmanship tips?" Nonomiya said, shifting to a safer topic.

"Huh? I'm not good enough to give anyone advice!"

"At least you're not quite as bad as we are."

"Nonomiya-chan, you don't have to be so blunt," Iku said dejectedly, sinking up to her nose in the bathtub.

Nonomiya hastened to correct herself. "No, I didn't mean that! I meant, you're much better than we are! Ma'am!"

"It's okay, I *am* the worse one in the Task Force, after all."

Meaning that the Mito Defense Force is just barely adequate, Iku realized. No matter how high they had aimed, their skill level just couldn't improve that much in just ten short days of training.

"I guess...be sure to squeeze the trigger hard even when you're in a rush. If you don't use enough force, you'll be sure to miss. Even if you're frustrated, take a minute to concentrate on pulling the trigger correctly. That's what helps me the most, at my level. Also, keep your eye on the target the whole time. That's about all I can tell you. But I don't think the women will be put on the front lines. I think we'll be asked to run communications and do resupplies and other logistical support like that."

"Even you, Kasahara-san?"

"I've been assigned as Instructor Doujou's runner."

"Wait, so you'll be following him into battle? You'll be running around on the front lines!?" a girl at one of the shampoo stations cried out in surprise.

"When it comes to middle distance running, I'm faster than he is. Just a little, anyway. I also have a lot of stamina."

Anyway, her duty would be simple and well-suited to her skills--all she had to do was wear a radio over her shoulder and stay hot on Doujou's heels.

"Task Force members are just as amazing as I thought!" she said, sounding wildly impressed.

Iku's smile was deeply self-mocking. "All I have is a good constitution, strong muscles, and fighting spirit. If you want to talk amazing, you should meet my teammate Tedzuka."

After they finished their bath, they climbed up to the roof to hang their laundry, and were met with a sight that halted all conversation in its tracks.

Iku's uniform--and only Iku's--was soaking wet on the line she had hung it from. Water still dripped steadily from the cuffs. Since Iku's uniform was as large as she was, it had probably been easy to pick hers out from the others. Even Iku's underwear and other things, hanging to dry among the others', had fallen victim.

The clothesline was under a sturdy roof, and the starry sky was free of rainclouds.

"...*they* were never this obvious," Iku muttered to herself, her mind jumping back to the friction she had experienced in her dorm during her inquest. She hadn't considered the fact that the bullies here would find it easier to victimize a perfect stranger.

Or how they would feel watching the previously-timid Defense Force girls surround her like a gaggle of happy geese.

The girls, wringing their hands over what should be done, seemed even more shaken than Iku. She walked a few steps away from them and pulled out her cell phone.

"If anything comes up, give me a call," he had said.

Doujou answered on the third ring.

"What happened?" he asked, already on red alert. His voice brought a prickle of tears to her eyes.

"I've become the victim of a nasty prank at the women's dorm."

"What did they do?"

"Drenched the laundry that I had put out to dry."

She had a few extra shirts and underthings. But her uniform was made of coarser cloth, and even if she wrung it out and set it to dry again, it would still be damp in the morning.

"Could dry it over here...no, never mind, that wouldn't fly, I'm sorry," Doujou withdrew his proposal after she told him that all of her clothes, including her underwear, had been blighted.

"You know, it's pretty likely that they'll go after today's laundry too."

"You're right; I think they've figured out which is mine."

"All right, here's what we're going to do. Bring your laundry, including today's, downstairs. I'll borrow one of the vans and we'll find a laundromat. That way you can get two days' worth of laundry out of the way at once."

"Oh, but in that case I could just do that myself..."

"You have to be a Library Officer Third Class or above to borrow an official vehicle. Chief Librarians can only borrow bicycles--are you going to pedal around looking for a laundromat in a town you haven't been back to in four years, and didn't spend much time in before that? Anyway...I don't know if you've noticed, but it's nighttime," he added in passing. Damn him and his nonchalant insults.

Iku agreed to meet him in ten minutes and hung up the phone, and then turned back to the other girls.

"Seems like the Administrative Division girls don't like the idea of you guys getting close to me. I'll be okay, so it would be best for you if you kept your distance. Nonomiya-chan, you should probably move back to your own room before I get back."

Don't cry. You're an outsider. Your wounds are the shallowest of any of them. Everyone's counting on you.

She stuffed her sodden uniform in a wet bucket, a discarded symbol of the crime that had been committed against her, and picked up the bucket in her right hand and the basket of today's laundry in her left. The other girls tried to help, but she turned them down, and withdrew from the roof.

By the time Iku made it down to the entryway, Doujou had already brought the car around.

"I've already notified them that we might not be back until after lights-out, so don't worry about the time. Let's go."

As soon as Iku was in the passenger's seat, Doujou gunned the engine.

"I was worried something like this would happen. Shibasaki said something about it."

Shibasaki said what about it?

Iku gave him a wary look, and Doujou answered her unspoken question as he drove toward the more brightly-lit section of town. "She said that since you'd be a total outsider at the Mito branch, you might be attacked more directly than you were during your inquest."

--So Shibasaki and Instructor Doujou were both nice enough to worry about me. So why--

Iku hugged her vinyl laundry bag to her chest.

Why do I feel so--

--resentful?

I resent them for talking about me behind my back. If you have something to say to me, say it to my face--no. That's not why.

The realization rocked her. Doujou must have noticed her arms tightening around her bag, for he said, "It's all right."

After a very long pause, he added hesitantly, "I'm here."

They found a large suburban laundromat relatively quickly, and Iku nearly bolted from the car.

She shoved her laundry into the largest dryer she could find, and jammed some coins into the coin slot.

The machine was already spinning by the time Doujou came in. He sat down at one of the tables, with his back toward Iku's dryer.

"Do you know how long it'll take?"

"Um, it said about forty minutes."

"We might make it back just in time for curfew." He looked at her. "What a disaster, huh."

Iku looked down at her feet and hid her face. So much had happened that she was overwhelmed.

"When I look at people like you, I forget that women like that exist."

You're wrong. --I'm not that kind of person anymore. That was why she was so devastated.

Her laundry, so recently soaked and still steadily dripping water. The deliberateness that had been piercingly clear at a glance, the deep-seated malice. How had she ever been innocent enough to believe that the same feelings didn't lie deep within her as well?

"I-I'm the same as them. If the situation were different, I...I might do the same thing."

Shibasaki had once asked her, *"Are you really okay with me pursuing Instructor Doujou in earnest?"*

"Sure, that's your prerogative," she had answered then, brushing the question off. What if Shibasaki asked her the same question now? What if Shibasaki actually fell in love with Doujou?

Could I stay calm and composed like it didn't affect me? Could I still stay friends with Shibasaki like I am now?

Her tears fell unceasingly, like the memory of her dripping laundry that she couldn't get out of her head.

"For example, I could see myself bullying Shibasaki or something, just like they did."

"You wouldn't do that," Doujou asserted bluntly, not looking at her. "I can imagine what you felt when you saw what they did to your clothes. It would never occur to you to do something that would cause someone else to feel that way. You're just not that kind of person. There are people who can think up those kind of pranks, and those who just can't. You're one of the people who can't."

"I could! If I really wanted to hurt someone..."

"You, you're the type to get into a fight instead. You'd get into a bad fight, and you'd hurt the other person badly. And you'd hurt yourself just as badly. But you'd never think up this kind of malicious prank." Doujou pointed at the dryer rumbling behind them. "Only someone who tries to hurt other people without hurting herself would. You're not like that."

"How can you just arbitrarily decide that?" Iku sniffled.

Doujou said, as if he were stating an obvious fact, "Because I've been your boss for almost three years at this point."

Her efforts to hold in her tears had plugged her ears, and everything sounded muffled, as if she were underwater. Perhaps that was why she was able to say it.

"Will you hold my hand?"

Her hands lay folded uselessly on the battered table. Without a moment's thought, Doujou reached over and put his hand over hers.

Iku almost pulled it back, she was so surprised at his lack of hesitation.

His hand tightened on hers, perhaps to keep her from pulling away. The cold wind of late autumn had blown in to Ibaraki slightly ahead of Tokyo, and the dreary laundromat seemed to have turned off its heater in order to save on expenses, so the warmth of his hand on hers was undeniably pleasant.

"If you and Shibasaki actually became enemies, I'd be more afraid of her and her ruthlessness. She'd hunt you down like a professional--none of these childish pranks with laundry. Komaki too..."

Iku *knew* he had said it as a joke. But she still couldn't help blurting out, "Stop it, please!"

Even without raising her head, she could tell that he had jerked his head up to look at her.

"...Please, just...don't talk about Shibasaki when she's not here. Don't compare me to Shibasaki."

Shibasaki was more talented than she was, and made a better subordinate to Doujou--even if all she did was pass on intelligence. And Shibasaki was more beautiful than she was, and was shorter than Doujou. Of the two of them, Shibasaki obviously suited him better--

This must be what people called "jealousy."

It was the first time Iku had felt it.

"I'm friends with Shibasaki, and I like her a lot. I don't want to hear you talk about her right now, sir."

Doujou probably had no idea what she was talking about.

"I understand. I'll stop," he replied immediately, not understanding her request but ready to comply. He patted her hand to reassure her. "I didn't mean to compare the two of you. Sorry."

"Please, don't," Iku whispered, her voice cracking. "I'm the one who should be apologizing. I'm just...such a mess right now..."

"If I have nothing to be sorry about, you don't either."

Doujou didn't let go of her hand until Iku pulled it away.

Her dryer had a sticker on it with a tagline claiming that it could even dry futons, but when she took out her uniform after the cool-down cycle, it was still a little damp.

"What do you think? Do you want to try and dry it some more?" Doujou asked, his back turned politely as she laid out her laundry.

She was silent for a moment. The old built-in cabinet in her room at least had hangers in abundance, and thanks to the detergent she had used, her uniform wouldn't end up smelling even if she hung it up to dry inside.

"It's fine. All my other laundry is dry; I'll just hang up my uniform in my room."

While Doujou's back was turned, she swiftly folded her underwear and shirts and wrapped the first up inside the second. She loosely bundled her uniform and shoved it into her vinyl laundry bag, then folded the bag over her other clothes so that they wouldn't get damp.

"Looks like we might make it back before curfew after all."

Just as Doujou had predicted, they were back in time to revoke his request for an extension of their curfew.

"I'm going to go return the car; you go back to your room. Next laundry day is the day after tomorrow, right? Call me when you've got your things ready."

Leaving her with those terse orders, he pulled the car away toward the garage on base. Iku saw him off with a bow, then went into the dorm.

The girls Iku passed in the entryway giggled when they saw her. Maybe they were the ones who had soaked her clothes; maybe they had known and done nothing. It wasn't worth picking a fight either way.

Iku silently took off her shoes, then pulled her sneakers and combat boots from the shoe shelf where she had been storing them and headed for her room.

She had told Nonomiya to drop off her key in the dorm manager's office, but the manager told her that it hadn't been returned. Iku cocked her head to the side and went back to her room. The doorknob turned as she approached, the occupant warned by her footsteps.

A head poked out; as she had expected, it was Nonomiya.

"...I thought I told you to move back to your own room?" Iku said.

"I'm sorry," Nonomiya said, smiling timidly. "But I was ordered to look after you while you were staying in the dorm. And even if I hadn't been, I don't want to desert you now. We all talked about it, and that's what we decided." She had been looking at Iku steadily through her glasses, but now she dropped her gaze awkwardly. "...I mean, it might be presumptuous to talk about deserting someone who's tougher and more self-assured than we are. But if all we did was depend on your strength without giving anything back, I think we really would be useless."

"No, you wouldn't," Iku said in a small voice. She might have Doujou to rely on, but within the dorm she still had to put on a brave face. And unlike her previous experience, the bullying wasn't just verbal.

Not needing a key because someone was there to open the door for you--it was a small thing, but Iku was grateful for it.

"Ah, you brought up all your shoes. I guess I can all too easily imagine them hiding them or something like that," Nonomiya said,

taking a sheet of newspaper out of the old cabinet and making a space for her to put her shoes. "Did your clothes get dried?"

"Yeah, I just have to hang my uniform up to dry a little more."

They had just finished putting everything in order when the lights-out announcement came. As Nonomiya unrolled her futon, she whispered "I'm sorry" again.

"It wouldn't have happened if we hadn't been so excited about being around you...but you're such an inspirational figure among female Defense Force members, we couldn't help ourselves. The Administrative Division girls couldn't stand to see us so happy. They wanted to bring us to our knees because we had the gall to smile." This last part was spoken with obvious deeply-rooted resentment, shocking for Nonomiya.

Iku had opened her mouth before she even realized it. "Things are going to change soon! I can't tell you how I know yet, but all these twisted practices you have in Mito are going to be overturned soon."

She couldn't tell Nonomiya to forgive her tormentors. There were still a few girls in Iku's dorm that she herself couldn't find it in her heart to forgive. But still.

"But when that happens, please don't turn into those people. They way you and all the others have been so nice to me made me really happy--it may be presumptuous to say this, but I'd be so sad if the people who were so kind to me turned around and became like *them*."

She knew firsthand that anyone could turn into that kind of person. That was why she had to say it.

Nonomiya, ensconced in her futon, took off her glasses and set them next to her pillow.

"...I don't think we'll ever grow to *like* the Administrative Division. For me, and all the Defense Force members in Ibaraki who have gone through the same trials, I think it will take a long time for grudges to fade. I don't know why things became this way. I can't speak for the others. But I swear to you, I won't become like *them*. That soaking wet uniform, to me, was the mark of a truly ugly mind--I don't want to become like someone who would do that."

Iku wanted to say "thank you," but it wasn't the kind of thing she could thank someone for.

"I'm turning off the light," she said, reaching her hand out for the pull string of the old florescent lamp.

*

It happened five days before the opening of the prefectural art exhibition.

A Task Force member from Udagawa's squad interrupted Doujou's squad in the middle of rigorous formation training at the branch base with a message. The battle formation drill was halted completely, and the messenger relayed his message to Doujou, whose expression immediately turned grim.

"My squad needs to step away from training briefly. Haga's squad will be taking over in the meantime."

Haga's squad moved briskly into place following Doujou's announcement, but confusion was written all over their faces.

Unlike marksmanship training, where those who had to step out could simply rejoin the back of the line, formation training had to be started over from the beginning if it was interrupted--and all the work they had done so far was rendered useless.

As Doujou's squad left the field and stripped out of their gear, Tedzuka asked, "What's going on?" At that point, Iku had no idea that *she* was a lead player in the drama about to unfold.

"Kasahara's mother stormed into training headquarters yelling about her daughter."

Iku froze in the act of removing her bandolier.

Why? How? Why is Mother here...?

"She was too busy threatening to make her daughter quit to listen to reason, so Commander Genda sent for Kasahara."

Iku unfroze with a start, walking so fast that she almost tripped over her feet. "I-I'm going to go change into civilian clothes, if I'm in uniform she'll figure--"

"You don't have to bother," Doujou said, not unkindly. "It appears that she came here because she found out that you're in a combat position."

"How...where did she hear that!?" Iku clutched her head, nearly panicking. Her voice was somewhere between a scream and a sob. "No! I don't want to talk to her! We have nothing to say to each other!" Iku shook her head violently.

Doujou held her still, and Komaki patted her shoulder. "Calm down," he told her. "Don't make a scene; you'll bother the others. The formation drill's already been delayed once."

She quieted her voice, and it caught like a sob in her throat.

"You're the one who's put off this confrontation for so long, Kasahara-san. Go and put an end to it."

Komaki's argument was as rational as always; there was no room for any objections.

I guess it's time to pay the piper.

"Don't worry, I'll be with you," Doujou said, patting her head gently. Then he took out his phone, apparently to call Genda. "This is Doujou. I'm bringing her now. It looks like it might turn into a bloodbath, so be ready."

A bloodbath? Iku looked at Doujou uncertainly.

"Don't pretend to be an obedient little girl and try and gently persuade her," he said, trying to spur her into action. "Go as far as you want--say whatever you want--everything you've wanted to say until now. I'm holding a trump card, and I'll play it if you say the word."

As Iku made her way toward training headquarters, nearly dragged by Doujou, Tedzuka called out "Knock 'em dead!" He probably meant to be encouraging, but in this situation it just made him look a bit like an idiot.

No one but Genda was at headquarters when they got there.

Iku's mother, Toshiko, had been waiting on the couch. As soon as she saw Iku, she stood up. "You shameless girl! How dare you take a job like this and hide it from your parents!"

"I'm sure you don't mean to insult our profession," Genda put in, trying to aid Iku a little against Toshiko's hysterical anger.

"It's no kind of job for a woman! No daughter of mine is going to be working here--at least, not for long!"

"You're not going to make me quit!" Iku shouted at Toshiko. "Don't you dare decide that for me! I'm working this job because I wanted to! I've busted my ass, and now I've finally started to gain a little respect from people around me!"

"Respect? What's the point of a woman gaining respect for working a nasty barbarous job like this!?"

"There are many other women besides Chief Librarian Kasahara in the Library Force. Do you mean to insult them as well?" This time it was Doujou who came to her aid.

"I'm not talking about other women, I'm talking about my daughter! She should be working a safer, more secure job..."

"So why don't you go out and find your ideal daughter somewhere else!?" Iku shouted, her voice ringing like a shot. A dam

broke within her. "Find some ladylike, elegant girl, who would never disobey her parents and who would never be as rude and unruly as me even by accident! If you have a problem with me, go ahead and disown me! See if I care!"

Smack! A cracking sound echoed from her cheek, where Toshiko had slapped her--though not hard enough to actually hurt.

"I'm saying this for your own go--"

Iku didn't let her finish. The left-handed slap she returned was a very light one for her, but it still whipped Toshiko's head to the side.

"If it comes to blows, you're not gonna win. I won't start it, but if you slap me I'm gonna slap you right back. So think about that before you raise a hand against me."

"Why did you turn out like this...!"

"What the hell are you talking about? I've always been like this, ever since my brothers and I were little. A belligerent little kid whose only talent was her fast reflexes. And you always say that you're doing things for my own good, but that's not it, is it? It's because I'm not your ideal daughter. When I was a kid, if someone had offered to trade me for a pretty little girl who looked good in a fluttery dress, you would have taken the deal, wouldn't you?"

"Kasahara," Doujou called, low but intense. "That's far enough."

She suddenly realized that Toshiko was weeping. "I can't believe you would think that," she said, sniffing.

But Iku's ability to feel guilt for going too far or pity for her mother had been used up long, long ago.

"This is what she does. She says, 'why don't you listen when I'm only saying this for your own good?' and tries to make me feel guilty. This is just like every other time."

"Just come with me." Doujou grabbed Iku's sleeve and dragged her out of the room.

"Why did you stop me? Weren't you the one who told me to say whatever I wanted!?" She could have talked for twenty-five minutes, she had so many grievances saved up.

"Be a good girl and take it from someone older than you: you've already said what you wanted to say. Anything more will just be overkill. If you don't stop this now, you might cause wounds that will never heal. Though I don't expect you to apologize right away or anything," Doujou smiled wryly. "Can you get in touch with your father?"

"What? Yeah, I guess...?"

"Explain to him what happened, and get him to come pick up your mother--maybe have him call her and try to talk some sense into her."

"You want me to fight a battle on two fronts!?"

"Trust me, your father won't fight with you. If you want, I'll talk to him myself."

When he put it like that, there was nothing else Iku could do. She pulled out her cell phone and reluctantly called her father's number. Though her family called him a "company man," he actually worked nearby at the prefectural office, so he would probably be able to step out for a short time.

"Hello, Father?" she began when he picked up--and at once was unsure how to continue. She looked to Doujou for help. He took the phone from her hand.

"Hello, this is Doujou--we met when you stayed at the Kantou Library Base. --Yes, Chief Librarian Kasahara's superior officer. Yes, she was promoted to Chief Librarian. With quite an impressive score on the exam."

What? When did Father and Instructor Doujou get so chummy!? Iku could do nothing but look on in astonishment.

"Yes, we're in town to provide reinforcements for the prefectural art exhibition, and your wife seems to have found out somehow...she just appeared at the branch base demanding that Chief Librarian Kasahara quit the Force. She and Chief Librarian Kasahara got into a quarrel, and she seems rather agitated, so perhaps you could call her and calm her down, or come meet her here..."

It was decided that her father would come to the base, and Doujou hung up the phone and handed it back to Iku.

How? Iku wanted to ask, but the question was stuck in her throat.

"Your father had the issue of *New World Weekly* with your picture in it," he revealed, looking awkward. "I think he left it for me to find. --Because I'm your boss!" he appended, as if the act needed an excuse. "I think he may have come to visit you to figure out if you were in the Library Task Force or were an ordinary Defense Force member. He's probably studied the Library Force's organization charts extensively since you joined--he knew when the promotion exam took place, and he just asked me how you did. Since you didn't bother to tell him."

"Did he...what did he...?"

"He was very proud of you," Doujou said, patting her head. Her tears, which had evaporated completely during her battle with Toshiko, spilled down her cheeks.

Katsuhiko, her father, came to pick up Toshiko almost a half hour later. He must have hurried over.

The first thing he did was greet Doujou. "Thank you for looking after my daughter," he said, then turned to Iku with his usual sour expression. "I heard you were promoted to Chief Librarian. Congratulations."

Katsuhiko went on to apologize to Genda, and Toshiko, seeing her husband apologize for her to her daughter's superior officer, began to understand the magnitude of the transgression she had committed. She wilted, and bowed her head along with her husband.

As Katsuhiko led away Toshiko, who avoided Iku's eyes, he said, "I'll explain everything to your mother in detail. When you have a few days off, please come and visit. Anytime."

After he had retreated a little, her feelings rose up and poured from her throat. "Father!" she called. Katsuhiko turned. "I'm sorry for hiding my post from you for so long! And I'm sorry that I didn't tell you about my promotion!"

Katsuhiko waved a hand behind his back. *Don't worry about it.*

"Mother!" Perhaps not believing that Iku was talking to her, she cringed in fear and didn't turn around. "Please try and learn to like me? I know I'm not your ideal daughter--I'm rude and unruly and belligerent, and I'm sorry about that, but please learn to like me. Someday."

Toshiko didn't look at her, didn't acknowledge her words. Iku knew she wouldn't, knew she might not for years.

But she was okay with that for now.

"Well done," Doujou said, patting her head, and the tension finally drained from her body.

*

"Hey."

That evening as she was eating dinner, a group of Administrative Division girls she had never talked to before came over to her.

"What?" she said shortly.

The girls tittered.

"Heard you had a rough day!"

Iku's chopsticks froze in mid-air. "You...!?" she said at once, her eyes flashing.

"Eeeek! Scary!" the girls laughed, and ran away. Halfway to the door they turned back, called, "It wasn't us!" and left, cackling rudely as they went.

Iku's appetite had deserted her, but she had a personal rule against leaving food on her plate unless it was unappetizing. So she forced the rest of her dinner down her throat, and then went back to her room.

Nonomiya was already in their room, and she wasn't alone--her roommate was with her.

The girl was already sobbing by the time Iku came back, and the moment she saw Iku, all she could do was kowtow in guilt and shame. And then Iku remembered--when they had kept her company on her first night in the dorm, the conversation had touched on Iku's background and her high school alma mater.

"I'm sorry...!" the girl cried, her head bowed.

Nonomiya added, "I'm sorry too, and I know I can't ask you to forgive her, but..."

Apparently Nonomiya's roommate had been grilled by girls from the Administrative Division until she had revealed information they could use against Iku. Then they had looked up Iku's high school yearbook, found her parents' phone number, and called to tattletale on her.

"Okay, I understand now."

Iku's swift acceptance just seemed to confuse the other two more.

"Now that I know why my mother suddenly stormed in here, I'm satisfied. So don't worry about it. She and I have worked things out--it didn't blow up like those girls were hoping. If apologizing settles your conscience or something, I understand, but really, it's okay."

And after I had kept my mouth shut for so long, she thought ruefully, and snorted. Some of the tension in her heart eased.

"It's mostly because I didn't think ahead or prepare enough. That first night, I said way too much about myself, just because we were having so much fun together. --Not that I regret it! I just didn't realize

that there were people here who would try to use those things against me."

It pained her to think of how Nonomiya's roommate must be feeling. From that first night until the laundry incident, for those few short days, she and the rest of the Defense Force girls had had so much fun together.

Iku could imagine how she felt, being interrogated for information gained during those happy times that they could use to bully Iku with. Being made to feel like an accomplice after she gave that information.

But she couldn't go against the Administrative Division if she wanted to keep living in this dorm. Not yet, anyway.

"So I should have been more careful from the beginning, so that even if they interrogated you, you wouldn't be able to tell them anything. I'm sorry that my thoughtless caused you such misery."

"It's not your fault, Kasahara-san...!" Nonomiya's roommate cried.

"I know, but my superior officer would tell me so anyway. He'd yell at me for being careless. And I respect his opinion. So really, don't worry about it," she told them, patting their shoulders--when an announcement came over the intercom.

"Chief Librarian Kasahara from the visiting detachment. Your brother is here to see you. Please come down to the the entryway."

"We're good now, so you can go back to your room when you feel like it," Iku said to Nonomiya's roommate as she headed toward the lobby.

Several girls from the Administrative Division were loitering in the entryway, hoping to find out what kind of man Iku's brother was. She was for once grateful that her brothers were uniformly tall and clean-cut. A height of 180 centimeters made men look twenty percent more attractive. Considering that their little sister Iku was 170 centimeters tall, it was no surprise that her brothers were all big men.

It was her eldest brother, the one who had found work in their hometown, who had come. Iku called him Big Big Brother; she didn't call her brothers by their names, but referred to them as "Big," "Middle," and "Little."

The girls who had come to gawk at him looked a little peeved. They had probably been hoping that her brother would be nothing special, the better to use him as ammunition for their jokes.

"What brings you here, Big?"

Her brother slipped on his sandals and led them out to the front of the building where they could be alone, and smiled sardonically. "Today, for the first time in recorded history, dinner at the Kasahara household was instant ramen."

"...Daaaaamn." For Toshiko, who worked diligently to be the perfect wife and mother, this was the height of depravity. "I'm so sorry, it's *all* my fault," she said teasingly. Apparently Katsuhiko had broken the news. "How did Mother take it?"

"She won't leave the bedroom. She's sulking up a storm since Father has taken your side."

Partway through asking after her other brothers, Iku cocked her head. "So, why did you come all the way here? It wasn't just to complain about the instant ramen, right?"

"No. It was because of the fight you and Mother had. I wanted to tell you a story--I know it because I'm the oldest, but you might not remember." Her brother settled down on one of the big decorative rocks in the yard. "Did you know you have a tiny bald spot on the back of your head?"

"What!? No way!" Iku's hand flew up to grab the back of her head.

"Yes way," he brother said earnestly. "The three of us, and Father, are to blame. We were pretending to rock climb up the hill in the backyard, and you fell down and cracked your head. I think you were about three."

"You--You took a three-year-old rock climbing!? Where was my safety rope!?"

"That was the problem; Father misjudged and made it too long."

"You've got to be kidding me!" Iku protested. Her brother ignored her, a faraway look in his eye.

"You needed three stitches, I think... And for a while you had a buzz cut, and that little bald spot. That's why there are no pictures of you from that time. Mother wouldn't let a single one be taken--she moaned about how pitiful it would be for a girl to have pictures of herself with a buzz cut."

"I wouldn't have really cared..."

"That's because you're a lot more like the three of us. But after that, Father lost his right to protest any of Mother's plans for your upbringing. That was also when Mother started to get so obsessed with forcing you to be ladylike."

When Toshiko would demand that Iku act like a lady, all Katsuhiro would do was scold her, *"Why can't you try and understand how worried your mother is?"*

As the man who had caused his own daughter to have a bald patch, it must have been difficult to challenge Toshiko openly. He was still on probation. All he could do was play it safe.

Iku couldn't help but laugh; it was a wet, choked-up sound.

"Then Mother doesn't..."

"She doesn't hate you," her brother confirmed immediately. "Forcing you to act like a lady was her way of ensuring that you wouldn't get seriously injured or killed. You know how she had a high-class upbringing, so she's a little out of touch with the real world? I think she had the narrow-minded view that the only way to keep a little girl safe was to raise her like a lady. She probably thought 'mission accomplished!' when you became a bookworm--but then there were the three of us, getting you into wrestling matches every day, and in the end she didn't end up raising a meek little daughter."

"W-Why...didn't anyone ever tell me...?" For the first time in many years, she was close to crying in front of her brother. "I always thought...that Mother hated me..."

Her mother had never bothered to come to terms with the reality of her daughter's personality, the fact that her legs and her reflexes were fast enough for her to enter the inter-high championship, instead insisting over and over that she act like a lady.

Iku had long ago developed a complex about her mother and that fluttery dress.

Doujou had thankfully stopped her from saying more, but at that point she had half-believed what she said--that her mother would have traded her for a pretty little girl who looked good in a fluttery dress, given the chance.

"...Because I couldn't be the perfect daughter she wanted."

"Well, there's some truth to that."

"Hey! Wait a minute, what happened to your pep talk!?"

Her brother smiled wryly and scratched his head. "It turns out that the most childish member of our family is our mother. There's a part of her that kicks and screams every time things don't go the way she expects. And she's tried to force all her children to do things her way. It's just that you, as the only daughter, had it the hardest. She expected that any daughter of hers would want to be just like her."

"So, basically...Mother can't tell the difference between love and ego even if she wanted to?"

"Damn, I don't see you for a bit and you turn all clever on me."

"But..." Iku pouted, "she went way too far with me, you know she did. Why did no one ever try and rescue me?"

Hearing the reproach in Iku's voice, her brother bowed his head gracefully. "I'm sorry. All I can say is that all the Kasahara men had a deep-seated reluctance to interfere when it came to you. Everyone but you remembered the accident, and if Mother had ever brought it up during an argument, we would have had no choice but to turn tail and run. Because of our carelessness, you could have died--what could any of us have said to that?"

Here was their mother's manipulation again. Apparently her brothers had reached the point where they saw it as inevitable and didn't hold a grudge. Just like Komaki had said once.

"...I asked Mother to try and learn to like me. Someday. Do you think she will, one day?"

"At the very least, I think she understands now that the way she was trying to express her love wasn't working. I think Father is going to start a long campaign to remedy that. So when you feel like coming home again, try to be a little more relaxed on your end too, 'kay?"

"Fine, but don't expect too much," Iku said, snorting.

"You're starting to get it," her brother said, and left the yard with a wave and a brief goodbye.

When she got back to her room, Nonomiya's roommate had already left.

"I'm so sorry, I..."

"Nonomiya-chan," Iku interrupted. One of Nonomiya's habits had been bothering her ever since they met. "You gotta stop it with the constant apologies. I told you before that this weird hierarchy you have is going to be overturned soon. Well, when that happens, if you're still in the habit of saying 'I'm sorry, it's my fault' about every little thing, they're just going to walk all over you again. Plenty of people are already going to be disappointed and bitter about having to let go of their unfair privileges, so the apologies have to stop. I told you before not to worry about it, that we were okay. Please believe me when I say it. And tell your roommate that really, honestly, she doesn't have to feel guilty?"

Nonomiya had a hard time finding the right words, but finally she said, "Understood."

As for Iku, as an outsider she had one more duty to perform for the sake of those poor girls.

*

The next morning at breakfast time, Iku chose the moment when the mess hall was most crowded.

She picked up her breakfast from the counter, and before she sat down at her table, she raised her voice. "I'd like to make an announcement to certain parties who will go unnamed!"

For better or for worse, even at the best of times, the only interaction most of these girls had with Iku was to bully her--and now she was making an announcement. The mess hall fell instantly silent. The girls who had laughed rudely at her yesterday were probably here--she couldn't pick them out, thanks to her bad memory for faces, but in any case they would definitely be hearing about this.

"I already know who was forced to provide the information that caused the trouble I was involved in yesterday. And I've already made up with her. So you won't be able to make her feel guilty by blaming her for the mess."

The buzz of conversation that her announcement had silenced started up again as a low murmur. *What on earth does this girl, this outsider, this outsider who will be returning to a place out of our reach after she's through supporting the Defense Force here, plan on saying?*

"If *anything* further happens to a member of the Defense Force, I will be writing a full report after I get back to the Kantou Library Base. I'm *sure* you all know that the performance reviews of all Library Force members go to the Kantou Library Base in the end, but maybe it's good to be reminded of that every once in a while? I'm willing to overlook the vandalism of my uniform and yesterday's trouble as a petty quarrel between us girls, but that was the last straw. We don't have time to indulge your childish pranks while we're fighting to protect the prefectural art exhibition. So if you want to get written up for serious internal interference with the security of the exhibition, bring it on!"

The noise level in the mess hall rose to a fever pitch.

It was as if they had just now remembered that Iku was a member of the Library Task Force, the group directly under the

supervision of the head of the Kantou Library Force that had come in response to the prefecture's demand for aid.

Iku sat down and nonchalantly began to eat her breakfast. She was enveloped by a cloud of fear, animosity, and other unflattering emotions, but no one was brave enough to say a word.

After she had finished eating, Nonomiya skittered after her.

"K-K-Kasahara-san!"

"Good morning, Nonomiya-chan. I think they'll stop messing with Defense Force now, especially that poor girl they used."

"But the things you said will just make them focus all their hostility on you!"

"No, it's fine. I'm an outsider, so I didn't have to pull my punches. I think I'll have more admiration for the girls who still come after me. I'll grind them to dust with the greatest respect."

If she was being honest with herself, all she had done was copy Genda's strategy for winning fights. She had considered trying to fight the girls' malice with benevolence, but--

"--Anyway, it looks like hostility isn't the only thing that'll get focused on me."

The girls who had picked on her yesterday had just caught up with them. At least, she thought it was them--with her memory for faces, she couldn't be sure.

"Um, Kasahara-san, we..."

"No need to apologize--it wasn't your fault, now was it? The perpetrator already said sorry to me, though she didn't tell me the names of those who forced her to become their accomplice... So according to the facts of the case, there's nothing I need to make you apologize for."

Smile at them. Like Shibasaki would. Like you're trying to turn them to stone. Like you're trying to scare the shit out of them.

Smiling with all her might, Iku added, "Oh, but wait--maybe you might like to apologize for laughing at someone's misfortunes and rubbing salt in her open wounds?"

Perhaps the girls really had come over to apologize, for they bowed their heads one after another. "I'm sorry."

*

That night, she told Doujou what had happened, and experimentally hung her laundry up on the roof. The next day, when she went to take it in and found it perfectly dry, Doujou was the first one she called.

"I'm so lucky that I have so many superiors and dormmates that are good at winning fights!"

"Wait, who are you counting there?"

"Hmmm, well, first there's Commander Genda, then you, then Instructor Komaki, and Shibasaki."

"Why am I in second place!? Haven't you seen the lengths I go to to rein in the Commander on a regular basis?"

The gap between their perceptions got them into another argument, but before he hung up, Doujou complimented her, "Good work, handling that all on your own."

Chapter 5, For Whom the Library Stands: Inamine Retires

*

When the Prefectural Art Exhibition was only two days away, the organizers and the prefectural governor issued a joint statement to the Department of Justice.

- The Ibaraki Prefectural Art Exhibition will open as planned at nine o'clock in the morning. At nine o'clock we will begin admitting visitors, and if by chance a civilian is hurt in the battle between the Improvement Special Agency and the Library Force, the Department of Justice will be held responsible.
- There will be absolutely no change in the schedule for opening day.

This statement was reported widely in the media, on television, and on the radio, and supported widely by the governors of other prefectures. The Department of Justice accepted their terms.

"Why will the Library Force be automatically assigning blame to the Justice Department?"

On television, a reporter was interviewing a group of important prefectural representatives, focusing on the prefectural governor and Fuchigami, the director of the Museum of Modern Art. At the end of the table sat Sugahara, the director of the Prefectural Library, but she maintained a grim expression and didn't try to contribute to the interview.

The slightly biased question was more or less what they had expected, so Fuchigami was calm as he answered.

"If we look at the situation impartially, the Media Improvement Committee is the one trying to interfere with the exhibition, so it's only natural that responsibility should fall on its parent organization, the Department of Justice. We've had to request backup from the Library Force just so the exhibition can proceed as normal--to ask us to take responsibility if, God forbid, something should happen to a visitor is unreasonable. What the Library Force will be held responsible for is if anything happens to one of the exhibits."

"Of course, I'm sure that the Improvement Special Agency will be taking great pains to make sure no there are no civilian casualties."

Q: "If the battle is raging too fiercely, won't you delay or cancel the exhibition? It seems like an obvious choice if one considers the safety of our citizens..."

Prefectural governor: "The opening time for the exhibition was decided six months ago; our schedule has priority. It would be tyrannical for the Justice Department to demand it be postponed because the battle with the Improvement Special Agency is dragging on--and if this happens, the prefectural office will be aggressively questioning the control that the Justice Department has over the Media Improvement Committee. Many other prefectures have agreed to support us in that case.

"Pressure from the federal government has no place in a prefectural art festival."

Q: "But there's been talk that this year's prizewinning work flies in the face of public order and morality..."

Fuchigami: "I must admit that the piece does express some aggression. We had a lot of trouble choosing a winner this year, but we unanimously decided on Freedom. It's generated a lot of excitement and interest among the citizenry already. I believe that the Media Improvement Committee should use the fact that this work was chosen as a moment for humble reflection--just like that earlier lawsuit over the word barber."

*

"They did a hell of a job."

In the large room at the branch base that had been set aside as the Library Task Force's meeting and break room, Genda was clapping. He was, of course, the instigator of the whole scheme.

"Damn but that director, Fuchigami, is good. The way he managed to ad-lib that jibe about the *barber* lawsuit! It must have been like a kick to the nuts for the Improvement Committee."

"Sure, but what was with those interview questions?" Iku pouted. "It gave me the creeps--it was like they were siding with the Media Improvement Committee."

"Don't be too hard on them," Genda said, untroubled. "The media has to walk a very fine line."

Iku still had reservations, so Doujou explained.

"The mass media is under the supervision of the Media Improvement Committee. Just like its name implies, the Media Improvement Committee has an outrageous level of control over all kinds of media. If a station criticizes the Committee too harshly, they invite even more restrictive controls. They have no choice but to be outwardly as neutral as possible while still appearing to support the Media Improvement Committee."

"But..."

Since they had used Orikuchi's network to gain access to the mass media, Iku had been hoping for a more critical stance from the station.

"Orikuchi belongs to a different world, a guerrilla war where suppression and seizure are everyday events," Genda said "You can't compare the world of weekly magazines to the world of broadcast news. But the news shows have their own way of doing things."

"What do you mean?" Iku cocked her head.

Doujou took over explaining again. "Basically, the interviewer's cowardice is misdirection. The interviewees are the prefectural governor, the museum director, and the library director--none of whom the Media Improvement Committee technically have any legal control over. They all have the right to make their opposition known."

When the Improvement Act had been passed, works of art hadn't been defined as "media." The Media Improvement Act had been more concerned with controlling actual speech. Additionally, they worried about backlash from citizens who didn't like the sound of "censoring art"--so it was something they usually refrained from doing.

"Most of their viewers have some latent opposition to the Media Improvement Act, and if they see interview after interview where a weak interviewer presents the Improvement Act's side, it'll fan that latent opposition into flame."

"Ah!" Iku finally understood. "So by acting spineless, they make the museum director and the prefectural governor look that much better and more resolute!"

And the mass media itself never had to say a bad word about the Improvement Act, so they would be left alone.

Since the federal government needed to be able to communicate with the prefectural governments about various future possibilities,

such as consolidating the prefectures into larger states, they couldn't afford to have all of the prefectural governors united in protest. Thus the prefectural governments could get certain concessions from the federal government, like restraints upon the Media Improvement Committee, which was but one organization within one ministry of the government.

In this way they were able to apply enough pressure to the Media Improvement Committee to guarantee that the battle over the exhibition's prizewinning piece ended at nine o'clock, when the exhibition opened.

Suddenly, someone's phone vibrated. Several people pulled theirs out to check, and Tedzuka stood up. "I'm sorry, I'm going to go take this."

From his bitter expression as he read the name off the display, the other three members of Doujou's squad guessed that it was from Satoshi, and shared a worried glance.

"Yes?" Tedzuka answered, stubbornly aloof as always.

Satoshi laughed wryly, as if he were used to this reception. "The Library Force just played quite a good hand."

You make it sound like you're not in the Library Force, Tedzuka almost said, but swallowed the impulse. He was dogged by the ever-present irritation at having to wonder just what side his brother was on.

"Was it Supervisor Genda's plan?"

"What the hell does it matter?"

"Don't be like that. Whatever you may think, I *am* a member of the Library Force, and I'm concerned over the situation in Mito." His tone was teasing, like he knew how irritated Tedzuka was. Tedzuka knew that if he opened his mouth, out would pour some sarcastic question about just *how* concerned his brother *thought* he was, so he kept resolutely silent.

I don't have to get along with him. I just have to listen to what he says, and remember it. He remembered Shibasaki's warning about not trying to compete with her.

"Well, anyway, it was a splendid move. Your superiors are capable men."

"Yeah, I think highly of them." There was no reason to deny it.

"Well, in honor of their skill, I'll pass along some information I managed to get a hold of."

"Oh, you're too kind." He spoke in a perfect monotone, but for Tedzuka this was major progress--before, he would have hung up on his brother without letting him say a word.

Satoshi may have known this, for he laughed. "Next time, put a little more emotion in your voice and you'll be fine," he critiqued. "Anyway, I wanted to let you know that Ibaraki Prefecture's demands with regard to the time limit on the battle will be met."

The Task Force had already predicted that they would, but Tedzuka asked, "Do you have any proof?"

He ventured to voice his doubts bluntly--like Iku did when she didn't understand something. His narcissistic brother probably wouldn't be able to resist the opportunity to educate him. He was the sort of person who took great pleasure in sharing his knowledge with the less well-informed.

If he hadn't gone astray, he could have had the makings of a nurturing leader.

"This time, the only ones who are really fixated on censoring *Freedom* are the Media Improvement Committee themselves. The Department of Justice has its own balance to maintain with the other ministries, so they're not inclined to make a big fuss over it. Especially since the prefectural governor has come out so strongly on the museum's side. In return, I think they'll demand that *Freedom* be set up in its final position before the battle starts. They'll avoid targeting the other works."

As usual, Satoshi made a fortuitous slip of the tongue.

Since they were young, Satoshi had always been happy to answer Tedzuka's questions, and not just those about homework. Tedzuka's expression hardened as memories he would rather forget surfaced in his mind.

"To the Department of Justice, it's just one uniform, and a fake one at that, being ripped apart for a collage. They don't understand what the fuss is over. But as another man in uniform, you probably understand."

"...yeah."

A uniform that one chose to put on symbolized, at the very least, that one had joined a group with certain beliefs, and one's pride and willingness to defend them.

Tedzuka would never, ever understand what pride the Media Improvement Committee found in censorship, for he couldn't see their beliefs as anything but illogical. But if those illogical beliefs caused

them to excessively revere that uniform as the symbol of their power, he could imagine how fierce their anger might be over its desecration. They would find the accusation that their power was unjust to be unforgivable.

"But the Media Improvement Committee is, in the end, subordinate to the Department of Justice. They can't go against the decisions of the Justice Department or the other ministries. And the Justice Department has already decided on a plan."

"...should you really be telling me all this?" Tedzuka cut in. Even if it was from Satoshi's top-secret pipeline to the Department of Justice, the abundance of detail was almost too good to trust. And--

Is it safe for you to be sharing this with me? Tedzuka thought, annoyed with himself for still caring, even now.

"Neither you nor your superiors will blindly believe my information anyway, so the outcome is the same whether or not I tell you. And even if it came out that I leaked this information, it's rather inconsequential. It basically boils down to the fact that this censorship raid is all about the Improvement Committee saving face."

Put like that, it almost made sense--indeed, Tedzuka's superiors weren't rash enough to swallow Satoshi's story without proof.

"But I appreciate your concern for my welfare," Satoshi teased, causing Tedzuka to regret ever opening his mouth. It was never a good idea to let Satoshi get too carried away.

"There will only be one censorship raid this time, on the first day of the exhibition. The Department of Justice won't permit another; they think any more would be pointless. If the Improvement Committee doesn't want the work exhibited, they have to seize it before the exhibition starts, or there's no point. If they spend days and days trying to raid after it starts, they put visitors in danger and throw the exhibition into chaos. And they worry that that would weaken the relationship between the Department of Justice and the Ibaraki prefectural government, even where non-censorship matters are concerned. The Department of Justice doesn't want responsibility for that disaster to fall on their shoulders."

You can rationalize just about anything if you want to, Tedzuka thought as he listened, brows raised.

In the end, the Media Improvement Committee and the Library Force were simply playing an absurd power game. But it was their job to play the very best game they could.

"Thanks. I can't verify that what you've told me is the truth or not, but for now I'll thank you anyway," Tedzuka said.

The last thing Satoshi said before hanging up, for no reason that Tedzuka could fathom, was "Give my best to your friend Kasahara-san."

The credibility of Satoshi's information became clear the next day, when the notification of the censorship raid arrived from the Media Improvement Committee.

According to the document, there would only one raid for the duration of the exhibition, and it would end at nine o'clock on the first day. However, the exhibition's prizewinning work would have to be installed in its final location before the raid commenced.

And unlike the usual notifications they received, the first signature on this one was not Media Improvement Committee chairman Onodera Shigeru's, but the Minister of Justice's.

"Looks like Tedzuka Satoshi's information was right on the money," Genda growled during a meeting with Doujou's squad. Except for Inamine, Shibasaki, and the occupants of this room, no one else was aware of the true intentions of the Library of Tomorrow Project.

There were no guarantees that Tedzuka wouldn't be suspected of being a spy for Satoshi if their connection were discovered. Their father, the president of the Japan Library Association, might also fall under suspicion.

Thus it was imperative to maintain the pretense that Tedzuka Satoshi was doing nothing more proactive with his radical views than running simulations at the Library of Tomorrow Project, and that cover had held up surprisingly well thus far. There were certainly people who found Satoshi's pipeline to the Department of Justice useful, and their secret communications were conducted very skillfully. As long as it kept insisting that it was only doing simulation research, no one could accuse the Library of Tomorrow Project of anything else.

"Even the Minister of Justice signed it. From our point of view, that's a public promise that all we have to do is get over this hill and we'll be safe as houses," Genda asserted. All present breathed a sigh of relief. Frankly, with the level of training the Mito Force members had, there was no chance that they'd be able to endure repeated battles.

"All right. First, we're gonna call an all-hands meeting of the Task Force to hammer out the battle plan, and then we'll pass it on to every squad in Mito."

*

"My, my, your brother *does* say something of use once in a while," Shibasaki said, using a joke to cover her self-consciousness at receiving a call from Tedzuka.

"It's not like it was *actually* useful..." Tedzuka said, his stubborn attitude plain even over the phone. "It wasn't anything we wouldn't have found out when the Improvement Committee's raid notice got here, anyway."

"But it meant the difference between being able to discuss strategy before then and just waiting around. It also proved that your brother's information network at the Department of Justice has a certain amount of reliability." Shibasaki had to work hard to maintain a cheerful tone, for her expression was dark. "I'm surprised you managed to hold such a long conversation with your dear brother."

"If I make him think I'm listening with rapt attention, he'll prattle on and tell me basically anything. He's always been like that--he loves playing big brother," he spat, but his voice shook a little with some fraternal emotion. It pained Shibasaki to hear it.

Not for her own sake, but for Tedzuka's.

"...Remember not to rely on him too much. These days he's the spiritual leader of the Library of Tomorrow Project first, and your brother second."

"Yeah, of course. Don't you think I know that by now?" Shibasaki's warning seemed to just make Tedzuka suspicious. Perhaps because it wasn't every day that Shibasaki tried to meddle in his business.

"Do me one favor. Get through the battle safely," Shibasaki said with uncharacteristic earnestness. Tedzuka's suspicion remained as they said their goodbyes and hung up.

As Shibasaki ended the call--

--"Thank you for bearing up so well," Inamine told her.

"There would be no point in passing on this information now. It would only distress them, and I don't want that."

The information that she had reported to Inamine before taking Tedzuka's call would indeed only slow down their movements. Her

single, final hope was that they would give it their all when the battle came.

*

The opening day of the exhibition arrived.

"Do you think the battle's really gonna start?" The Force members from Mito were restless--meaning that almost every fighter on the library's side was restless.

The four buses equipped with gunsights that the Library Task Force had brought, along with the branch base's larger vehicles, were parked around the prizewinning work and the library as shields. Trenches had been dug around the grounds to facilitate troop movement.

In spite of the fact that they were stationed in formations around the Modern Art Museum and the Prefectural Library, and in spite of the fact that they were clutching weapons and arrayed for battle, it seemed that the Mito Defense Force members didn't truly believe that there was going to be a battle.

Then, at six o'clock in the morning--

The peaceful dawn was shattered by the sudden reverberation of gunfire.

"Ahhhh!" Screams rose from the Defense Force, swelling like waves. Because the library, which just provided the pamphlets for the exhibition, had been judged a less important target, the more inexperienced Mito Defense Force members had been stationed there.

"What the hell are you doing, screaming like crybabies!? Are you trying to boost the Improvement bastards' egos or what!?" bellowed the Library Task Force assistant commander, Ogata, who was in command of the defense of the library. The wave of screams ebbed. "While you're over here pissing your pants, they're fighting the main battle at the museum!"

The Improvement Special Agency was massed around the border of the Library Force's defenses, and had already started to break through.

"Permission to fire!"

Genda's order had come through on their shared radio frequency. The Library Force began to return fire. The Task Force snipers, stationed as usual at the highest places on the field of battle, began to menace them as well. Just as the Special Agency looked to be in full retreat, Tedzuka's voice came screaming out of the radio.

"Officer Shindou has been shot!"

"What did you say!?"

"Straight through his right arm! He can't hold a gun!"

"Where did it come from!?" Genda bellowed over the radio.

Iku took in this information, then urgently reported it to Doujou.

"Officer Shindou was just shot--right through the arm--can't shoot anymore! Location of enemy sniper unknown!"

As she reeled off the information, it suddenly came to her. During a moment of radio silence, she shouted to Doujou, "The trees! They're not as tall the buildings, but from one you could hit a sniper who leaned out too far!"

Doujou's eyes went wide, and he thumped Iku on the shoulder. Interrupting the others on the radio, he said, "The enemy has stationed snipers in the trees!" He eyed Iku, prompting her for more.

"In the evergreens, those are the tallest! And their leaves haven't fallen, so they provide camouflage! They'll be on the tallest branches that'll still support a person's weight, and near the trunk since the branch is thickest there!"

Doujou repeated her ideas, adding, "Be on the lookout at the library too!" before cutting out.

"Good work," he said, thumping her hard on the shoulder again. She was a little mystified, until she realized that her helmet was preventing him from rumpling her hair as he usually did.

Shindou and Tedzuka were the only snipers stationed at the Museum of Modern Art. Many of the more experienced Task Force members had gone to the library to bolster the inexperienced Mito Defense Force.

Just as Doujou had told Tedzuka over the radio, the shooting was in fact coming from several of the trees that ringed the building. He crouched low to get out of the line of fire, draped Shindou over his shoulder, and stumbled inside.

"What an embarrassing screwup..." Shindou laughed darkly. Tedzuka, busy giving him first aid, had no answer for that. The museum's landscaping, meant to create a beautiful artistic space surrounded by nature, had been completely turned against its defenders. It must have taken an ugly mind to come up with such an ugly strategy--but this was still their screwup. Tedzuka could more than sympathize with Shindou's feelings.

"If they've taken the high ground from us, it'll make things hard for our forces on the ground. Can you do this, Tedzuka?"

"Yes, sir." He shouldered two of the rifles.

Shindou picked up his own rifle. "I'll act as a decoy and shoot from the doorway up here on the roof. If they think there are still snipers on the roof, they'll want to clear us out first. You go downstairs to where you can snipe them in the trees. While we're shooting at each other, mark their positions. Once you know precisely where they are, take them out precisely with one shot each."

"Can you shoot with that arm, sir!?"

"If all I have to do is shoot, sure. If it doesn't matter if I run out of bullets, and if I don't have to hit anything. In exchange--" Shindou's gaze was steady. "Take them down the first time. I won't tolerate mistakes."

Tedzuka saluted silently.

Tedzuka descended one floor to get a better vantage point and waited for Shindou to start shooting. It was difficult to pick out human figures in the trees, as they were covered in dense foliage even in autumn, and the scope on his rifle was practically an antique.

At last, a shot descended from the roof. Two shots ascended at the same angle in reply.

Those two shots were enough to narrow the field. Tedzuka picked a tree and raked his eyes up its length. Doujou had said the snipers would be clinging to the trunk, as high as possible.

No, he wouldn't be able to climb that high; a man of average size would be lower. He moved his gaze down little by little as Shindou shot a second time.

There was one of them. But he couldn't be rash, he had to find one more. He squinted at another tree.

Shindou shot a third time. --Bingo. *Like hell I'm going to make you shoot again with that arm.*

Tedzuka was in his third year with the Task Force, and his sniping had only improved since the battle at the Museum of Information History.

I can--I will do it.

He steadied his breathing and quietly opened the window. Just wide enough that he could get the angle of the muzzle right.

Within a moment, his focus narrowed until all that existed was his gun and his target.

He took down one. Then he coolly adjusted his aim and took down a second. Screams and thumps followed.

There was no return fire. He ran back up to the roof. Shindou was sitting heavily against the wall. The field dressing around his arm was stained bright red.

"Officer Shindou!!"

"Hey." Shindou waved his left hand as if to say, *it's no big deal*. "You're very good."

"Sir, you exaggerate...!" If he had done well, it was only because Shindou had acted as bait to reveal their enemies' location.

"I thought you'd need four or five shots."

"...I'm not that *bad* either," Tedzuka asserted. This time, he picked up both of their rifles. "Let's get you to the infirmary."

Tedzuka lent Shindou his shoulder and helped him stand.

"Will your arm be all right?"

A bullet to the arm could be lethal to a sniper's career depending on where it went in.

"Yeah. I mean, I could still shoot with a big hole in it. If I don't slack off in rehabilitation, I'll probably still be in charge of this team ten years from now."

The impersonal way he talked about his own career was, strangely, the thing that almost brought Tedzuka to tears.

"Please, get better soon--as fast as you can."

It was all he could do to get it out before he choked up.

"I've subdued the enemy snipers at the Museum of Modern Art," Tedzuka reported, and a similar report arrived from the library soon after. Night had brightened into day; the Special Agency had lost their chance to climb back into the trees without being seen.

At the museum, Genda shouted over the radio, *"We've gotta get snipers back on the roof! Komaki, go up and take over for Shindou! Tedzuka, get back to your station ASAP!"*

It was also important to station soldiers on the rooftops to get a view of the entire situation on the battlefield. On the ground, Komaki turned over command of the group he had been leading to the next member of the chain of command, picked up his rifle, and ran inside the building.

The moment Komaki left, the rate of gunfire from his group dropped off sharply. The one he had passed command to was one of the top brass at the Mito headquarters.

"Dammit," Doujou swore quietly from beside them, and ran over. Iku followed him as they slipped behind one of the vans.

"Shoot, you idiots! Even if you're shooting blindly, keep pulling the trigger! Sections that look weak will draw fire! Don't let something as small as a change of command break your concentration!"

As he spoke, Doujou never stopped firing his rifle, which was pointed out one of the broken windows of the van. Iku kept pulling the trigger on her submachine gun until she was out of ammunition. By that time, the group had rallied, and was firing at their previous rate.

Since Komaki had been commanding the group until just a few moments ago, it was only to be expected that their ammunition supply was in good shape. But Doujou thrust a finger at the Force member who had taken over for him.

"Always pay attention to your group's supply of ammo. When half of it is used up, you call for a resupply. The enemy will be on top of you the *moment* you run out!"

The group's new commander jerked his head up and down in a nod, but he was clearly out of his depth.

As they left the group, Doujou ordered in a low voice, "Tell Commander Genda that he needs to dispatch a Task Force member to aid that group." Iku relayed the message over Genda's channel.

Nonomiya and the other women had been assigned to help the Logistical Support Division. They passed messages between squads and responded to fast-flying demands for supplies.

Male Force members had been assigned to actually transport the supplies, but thanks to the conditions at the library for the last few years, they were inexperienced in combat and many of them had been injured by gunfire and ricocheting bullets.

Eventually, a request for resupply came in while all the able-bodied men were already out delivering to other squads. It was from the squad stationed at the back entrance of the library.

"What should...what should we do?"

The girls were utterly dismayed.

"Should we wait for the men to come back?"

"We don't have time for that!" cried Nonomiya. It was the kind of thing Kasahara would have been bellowing if she were here, she thought. "Even we girls can transport supplies, if we use a handcart! Someone go get one!"

Several of the women ran to the storage room, at last returning with the cart. They unfolded it and stacked the requested boxes of ammunition, sorting them so they wouldn't get mixed up. The cart ended up being too heavy for one person to push, so it was decided that Nonomiya and her roommate would go.

...We can defend the library too.

She thought defiantly of the girls from the Administrative Division who had looked down on her.

...Today, you're the ones who can't do anything. But us--there's something we can do.

Pushing the heavy cart--it tended to weave even with the two of them steering--they headed for the waiting squad.

The back entrance, which they used daily without a thought, looked like a gateway to another world.

"Resupply, sir!" she called, but the sound of gunfire was too loud for her voice to carry far. "Resupply, sir! Resupply, sir! Resupply, sir!" she repeated, a little hysterically, until one of the Force members finally turned around. It was a stubbly-faced older man.

"You gals brought that all the way here!?" Though he addressed them as "you gals," his face was unfamiliar. He must have been among the reinforcements.

"All the--all the men were out--so we--"

"Thanks, you're a pair of lifesavers!" He turned to the Force members deployed outside and shouted, "Hey! Ammo's here! Come and unload it!"

One man after another ran over, shouldered a box of ammunition, and carried it outside.

"Did...did we help?"

"Are you kidding? Of course!" the scruffy man confirmed.

Nonomiya wrapped her arms around her roommate and slid to the ground.

The clamor of gunfire was loud enough to drown out her wail; she couldn't even hear it herself.

"Get back to your station! You may have helped now, but it's not over yet!"

Cheered by his bellowing voice, Nonomiya and her roommate ran back to their station.

It was thirty minutes to nine o'clock when the Special Agency's offensive finally turned into a rampage.

"Looks like they've given up their assault on the library," Komaki murmured as he watched the scene from the roof. The troops that had been attacking the library were now massing in front of the museum.

On top of that, warning shots from the two snipers had long since ceased to deter the enemy. Komaki and Tedzuka had lost count of the number of people they had shot.

"Rooftop sniper squad calling Commander Genda. The Improvement Special Agency now seems determined to move forward by any means necessary. Warning shots are no longer holding them off." Komaki dispassionately surveyed the ground and continued his report. *"They seem to have given up trying a frontal assault using their vehicles as shields. The troops that were stationed at the library have been called over here. Looks like they're trying to storm our trenches and use them to invade--it's almost like they don't care about casualties on their own side anymore."*

"Gather the ballistic shields! If there aren't enough, make up the difference with iron plates or anything you can find!" Genda ordered immediately. *"Use the shields to push them back! At the same time, deprive them of their combat capability! Don't hesitate to shoot at close range! Your first priorities are reduction of the enemy's capabilities and defense of your own lives!"*

They were in the middle of collecting the ballistic shields when Doujou told her, "Kasahara, go back inside."

"No," she replied immediately.

"Kasahara." Genda's earlier order was probably responsible for the pleading note in his voice.

Your first priority is the defense of your own lives. Meaning the enemy no longer intended to follow the rules of engagement--especially the rule about not shooting to kill. That rule might be more wishful thinking than anything else, but there was a difference between shooting with the intent to kill, and using gunfire to reduce the enemy's ability to act.

"I'm your runner, Instructor Doujou. No matter how the battle turns out, I'll see it through with you until the end. Anyway, I'll probably be more useful in battle than most of the guys from Mito."

"You idiot," Doujou spat in surrender, then turned to the squad he was in command of. "We'll be defending the third trench! Use your shields to seal it off! And be careful of enemy troops trying to climb over the buses!"

It was a scene so awful, she wanted to grab one of the Improvement troopers and demand to know why they were so hell-bent on fighting. The Improvement troops advanced on the wall of shields the Library Force had set up, crashed into them, and kept firing. Occasionally a splatter of blood would rise like a fountain from beyond the shields--probably due to the crushing pressure coming from both sides. The Library Force had devised an arrangement of shields that would keep back the mob (for now the Improvement troops were closer to a mob than anything else), but from what she glimpsed of the front line of Improvement troops, it wouldn't be surprising if some of them ended up crushed to death by the terrible pressure. Their bodies, in fact, were providing a safe buffer between the Library Force and the Improvement troops.

And even then, the rest of the Improvement Special Agency didn't stop pushing.

Their faces were swelled to unrecognizability and smeared with blood. They were pressed against the shields by their fellow Improvement troopers and jerked around by the movement around them. As Iku caught glimpses of their smashed faces through the clear shields, she suddenly couldn't stomach it anymore, and threw up.

She wasn't convinced they were still alive--or even if they were, they wouldn't be for long if they didn't get into an ambulance and sent to intensive care right now--

Please, please, just surrender. Aren't these people your brothers in arms? How in the world can seizing a work of art be worth killing your brothers? I know the piece is critical of you guys, but every person and organization in the world gets criticized sometime. I understand how you feel seeing your uniform desecrated--but you'd jump at the chance to stomp all over one of our uniforms, wouldn't you?

She vomited until she tasted bile, then suddenly noticed a shadow falling within her field of vision. It was coming from the roof of one of the Task Force's buses--cast by a group of men who came boiling over the top--

"STOOOOOOOOOOP!"

Iku rose to her knees, yanked her submachine gun out from where she had stuck it in her bandolier, and pulled the trigger, drawing a straight line across the roof of the bus. She must have hit them all

across the chest, for they were all simultaneously thrown back behind the bus again.

She didn't want to be a baby about shooting people for the first time, but as she knelt there she couldn't stop the tears that were rolling down her cheeks.

She fired until she was out of bullets.

Time to reload the magazine. There might be more of them coming. Still frozen in a kneeling position, Iku tried to reload her submachine gun. Though the act should have been automatic by now, she was shaking so hard that she couldn't get the magazine to go in.

"Huh?--why won't it--c'mon--go in, go in, go in, *go in!!*"

A hand reached over and took her gun from her. When she looked up, she discovered it was Doujou. He swiftly reloaded the gun and gave it back to Iku. "Good eye," he said, and embraced her. She knew it was to calm her down, and for no other reason. For it wasn't until he embraced her that she realized how badly she was shaking.

"Komaki calling Doujou's squad. The Improvement troopers that Librarian Kasahara shot are retreating. No sign of a second wave approaching at this time."

Iku was aware enough to realize that Komaki, with his bird's-eye view of the battle, had radioed in to reassure Iku that she hadn't killed her enemies. They had been wearing bulletproof vests, and her gun had been lightly-loaded--the least deadly combination.

At any rate, they were in a lot better shape than the Improvement troopers that had caused Iku to vomit.

But that wasn't the point.

When Iku had shot her gun to stop them, the only thought in her head had been the instinctual need to kill them before they killed her.

At last, a siren sounded at nine o'clock. The Improvement Special Agency pulled back like the tide. And just as the ebbing tide leaves detritus on the beach, they left an atmosphere of deep resentment in their wake.

As for the Improvement troopers who had been crushed between the two forces, who might have been alive or might have been dead, their fellows each took an arm or a leg and dragged them away.

The exhibition was supposed to open at nine o'clock, but the Library Force persuaded the prefecture to delay it by thirty minutes so that they could clean up and restore the wrecked grounds in the aftermath of the battle.

Iku was next to useless during this interval; she just sat silently, tears streaming down her face, with Doujou at her side.

"Everyone's like this the first time they shoot someone."

"Liar," Iku retorted, shaking off Doujou's attempt to console her. "Tedzuka wasn't, when he shot that Improvement trooper during our first raid."

"You were also already disturbed from seeing what happens in a large-scale battle for the first time. You may not have noticed it, but a lot of people threw up after seeing the faces of those front line Improvement troops. There were grown men who threw up before you did."

Oh, Instructor Doujou noticed that I puked...

"Thank you, sir."

"For what?"

"For not giving me special treatment."

"Thank *you*," Doujou said, resting his hand on the top of her head with a *plonk*. "When you told me that you'd see the battle through with me to the end because you were my runner...I couldn't compete with that."

Couldn't compete? What does he mean? Iku raised her head, confusion written across her face--

"You don't have to get it," he said, pushing her head back down.

*

The Improvement Special Agency may have retreated, but the story was far from over.

Almost immediately, sound trucks belonging to groups that supported the Improvement Act began circling the grounds of the museum, broadcasting hostile messages. They didn't want to give the Library Force one moment to breathe after the battle.

And then, who should run over to surround *Freedom*, the piece they had just finished defending, but the Society for Nonresistance, ignoring the announcements about not running in the museum. They were led by Takemura, their apparent president.

Considering what had happened on the day the Task Force had arrived, and considering the role the group had played in encouraging the twisted biases of the Ibaraki library world, it should come as no surprise that they were met by universal scowls on the faces of the men who had just finished fighting. The grudge that the local Mito

troops bore was especially strong, and the Library Task Force had to step in between the two groups.

"How dare you take this...this exhibition, this symbol of the arts, and turn it into a scene of carnage!" Takemura accused them self-righteously in a shrill voice. "Did you see the Improvement troops who were dragged away? They may be your enemies, but they're still human beings--how dare you inflict such ghastly, such grievous injuries! Is that how one defends art and culture!?"

"I'd like to hear you say that after you go and visit the Library Force's wounded as well," Genda boomed out. He wasn't even shouting, but he overpowered Takemura anyway.

The situation at Mito had kept the Ibaraki Library Force ill-prepared for battle, and a couple of weeks of drilling had not been enough. They had sustained heavy casualties.

The only thing that separated them from the Improvement Special Agency was that their injuries hadn't been caused by their comrades using them as stepping stones during the free-for-all.

"Moreover, those 'ghastly injuries' were caused by other Special Agency troops, who were so eager to fight us that they were willing to trample their own to do so. When we were faced with that kind of ferocity, were we supposed to play the pacifist and give up the thing we had been charged to protect?"

Takemura seemed to be frustrated by the pressure Genda was putting on him, for his voice grew shriller and shriller. "Do you think you're some kind of hero, prattling on about justice while firing a gun!?" he cried.

Iku shrank back behind Genda's broad back and clung to Doujou's shoulder. She was so infuriated that tears ran down her face.

The first time she had shot someone, the way that the bullets she had personally fired mowed down her enemies had been terrifying. Just by pulling a trigger, she had sent men flying off the roof of a bus.

Who would shoot a gun to try and be heroic? That wasn't why the Library Force used guns.

Iku didn't know when it had happened--the country had grown warped before she was even born--but in a world where guns had become necessary to resist censorship--

It's impossible for us to do anything but take up arms and shoot anymore.

"A very noble opinion," a voice interrupted--not the piercing tones of Takemura, but a deep, commanding, familiar voice. The

company turn as one toward the new voice and found the prefectural governor, trailing secretaries and staff members.

Peeking out from behind Genda's back, she could see that her father Katsuhiko was among them.

"Why aren't you sharing that opinion with the Media Improvement Committee and the groups that agree with them, I wonder? They obviously have pretensions to heroism, as they conduct and celebrate censorship! You speak as if the Library Force bears all the historical responsibility for the escalation of the censorship conflict, and after they've just done us the favor of defending the prefecture's art and property!"

Understandably, Takemura and the Society for Nonresistance had not expected the prefectural governor to appear, and they flinched at his words.

"No one picks up a gun by choice, when to shoot one means bringing about the injury or death of someone else. The Library Force dirties their hands so that we don't have to. Are you willing to dirty your hands in their place? If not, you have no right to attack them!"

The next thing Iku knew, Doujou's arm was wrapped around her vest, holding her up.

Regardless of what had actually happened, in her mind Iku had killed the men who had been trying to attack her the moment she had pulled that trigger. There was blood on her hands now. The governor's words about her hands being dirty had been blunt, but they were her salvation.

It meant someone understood why. And if she knew that there were people who understood, she was willing to dirty her hands as many times as she needed to.

"The only place you'll find champions of justice fighting against a nice clean backdrop is in a storybook."

"In real life no one's going to clear the road for you."

"If you're not prepared to get dirty, you should give up your dreams of being a champion of justice."

Shibasaki's cynical words came back to her. But even Shibasaki's cynicism had been too kind. *It isn't dirt that stains the Library Force. It's blood...*

Meanwhile, the governor had continued to speak. "Or are you willing to stand in front of this work, and not back down from censorship even in the face of death? Are you willing to let your own death be a wake-up call to the populace? If so, be my guest and attack these men and women who just put their lives on the line for the sake of the prefectural art exhibition, and for culture being destroyed by censorship!"

As chance would have it--

An opportunity to put the Society for Nonresistance to the test materialized at that moment.

"GET OUT OF THE WAY!!"

A savage cry interrupted the governor's resonant voice, then--

A long burst of gunfire pierced the sky, and two young men armed with submachine guns charged in.

Takemura, followed by the rest of the Society for Nonresistance, scattered like rats, pushing over the governor and his staff in their haste to flee.

Genda's angry bellow cut through the chaos. "Everybody get down!"

The Library Force members hit the ground automatically. Doujou threw himself over Iku for good measure.

"Governor, everyone, stay where you are! Don't get up!" Genda shouted. Alone, he moved to stand in the way of the assailants. "The prizewinning work you're gunning for is behind me! Shoot if you dare!"

Though there was never any proof, it was not unusual for the Special Agency, having failed in its mission, to attempt to achieve it using members of extremist groups as pawns.

The two men trembled for several moments in indecision, but at last--

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAUGH!"

Screaming incongruously, they let loose a hail of gunfire. Every *crack* meant another bullet speeding toward Genda.

"Commander Genda!!" Iku instinctively tried to rise, and Doujou forced her back down to the ground. "Don't! The commander--!" If he stood in that rain of bullets...

"Don't move!" As he held her down, Doujou shouted in her ear, almost loud enough to pop her eardrum. "If you raise your head it's gonna get blown off!"

Iku plastered herself to the ground. Whether because he knew her personality or he knew what she would do, Doujou had thrown himself on top of her, and it meant his body was higher off the ground than hers.

At last, the submachine guns were out of bullets.

When the company raised their heads to look at Genda, he looked like a red demon, dyed bright scarlet. Genda was looking at his assailants.

"Is that all you got?" he asked, grinning broadly--and then fell forward with a crash.

"Commander Genda!!"

When everyone, especially the Task Force, made a move to run to Genda, the assailants screamed, "Don't move!! We still have weapons!" and pulled out the handguns that had been stuck in their belts.

Through the crowd of Force members, frozen where they stood half-risen, the shooters fired on the prizewinning work--on *Freedom*. There were five shots, quieter than the submachine guns' blasts. The glass case held up for four of those shots, but at the fifth one, a spiderweb of cracks spread across the surface. The bulletproof case that the museum had set up probably wouldn't have withstood the submachine guns' fire, but it had protected the artwork from this last assault.

"Take them down!" cried Ogata, the assistant commander, and one after another Force members dove at the assailants and forced them to the ground.

"Commander!" Komaki was the first to reach Genda. The rest of Doujou's squad, as well as the other squads, caught up quickly and surrounded him.

Iku bit her hand, hard. She knew she could do nothing but scream or cry, which wouldn't save Genda. The only useful thing she could do was watch with the other Task Force members and not cause any trouble, and to that end she bit her hand until it bled.

"Numerous grazes on his head, bulletproof vest pierced in three places, bullets still possibly lodged inside! Many grazes, perforations, and lodged bullets in his limbs! Counting his torso I estimate he's been hit in about twenty places!" Komaki confirmed.

Right on his heels, Tedzuka reported, "An ambulance is on its way!"

"Bring all the tourniquets we have! And report in if you have the same blood type as the commander--he's type O!" This was Doujou. After that, Iku couldn't pick out anyone else from the clamor of voices.

She kept on biting her hand, until it occurred to her that there was something she could do.

She detached herself from the crowd and ran over to the prefectural governor and his entourage, who were watching the events from a slight distance.

"Is anyone injured!?" She could tell from a glance that no one was, but it was her job to ask.

"We're all right here, just some scratches from being shoved by that group. How is your commander?"

"His condition is critical--he's lost a lot of blood--" This she said to the governor, and then she turned to Katsuhiko. "Father, please!" she begged. "Commander Genda is type O; could you please get blood donations from anyone here who has a matching blood type? He was shot more than twenty times, I'm sure he'll need major surgery...!"

"Kasahara-kun," the governor said to Katsuhiko. "Arrange Genda-san's admission to the Red Cross Hospital, priority one. I'll leave the details up to you."

"Yes, sir."

Perhaps in deference to Katsuhiko and Iku, the prefectural governor said, "Let's visit the exhibition another day, when we can take our time," and left with the rest of his entourage.

Katsuhiko whipped out his cell phone and started making calls. He made arrangements with the hospital. He checked the blood bank's stock. He verified the amount of blood that would be needed. He figured out the amount that could be donated by the Library Force and used for transfusion. All this was done in an instant. If only the Library Force donated blood, even if each of them donated 400cc, it wouldn't be nearly enough.

He ended up arranging for three bloodmobiles to park in front of the prefectural office, and another two at city hall, calling for urgent cooperation from all officials.

When she tried to say, "Thank you, Father," Katsuhiko hugged her hard for the first time in ten-odd years.

"Thank you. You and the Library Force have shown me how determined you are. I promise to come and see *Freedom*, the artwork you and everyone else protected, before the exhibition is over."

With that, Katsuhiko returned to his office, not looking back.

"Commander Genda is going to be admitted to the Red Cross Hospital. The supply in the blood bank and the Library Force's blood donations aren't going to be enough, but the prefectural office is going to do all it can to help make up the difference," Iku reported, too overwhelmed to speak in anything but a level tone. She gave the Library Force its first glimmer of hope since Genda's ambulance had departed.

"You asked your father?" Doujou said.

Iku tilted her head, remembering how it had gone. "I went and begged him for some help from his office, and the governor told him to make it happen."

"You've got guts. None of us could have done something like that."

So thank you, he was saying. *It's a good thing you were here.*

"It's...only because my father works in the governor's office."

"Even so."

The exhibition's opening had been delayed again, until noon. Apparently visitors had expected some amount of chaos on the first day, so there were few complaints.

Before then, they had to take *Freedom* out of its cracked case and put it into a new one, and clear away the remnants of the battle.

And we better sprinkle some dirt over the traces of Commander Genda's blood, or the patrons will freak out, she thought absently.

She noticed that there were fewer Library Force members milling around and asked Doujou about it; he told her that the Force members who could donate blood had returned to the branch base so they could hurry to the hospital. They had been waiting on standby, ready to depart as soon as they knew which hospital to head for, and thanks to Iku's announcement were already on their way.

"Oh! I'm type O too, I need to go--"

"Forget it," Doujou told her. "Your face is white as a sheet. You're almost certainly anemic; even if you went you'd be turned away after the pre-donation exam. Our squad can't help out with blood donation, but there's a slew of other things that need to get done. The cleanup has barely been started, and we have to put together an adequate guard rotation schedule with those of us who are still here."

"The commander's going to live, right?" Iku asked. It was almost a plea.

Doujou put an arm around Iku's shoulders and squeezed hard, like he was having trouble containing his emotions and needed an outlet. From that she knew Doujou, too, needed to believe that Genda would be alright.

"Don't know. All we can do is do our jobs."

Doujou let go of her shoulders and began walking briskly. Iku had to jog to catch up with him.

*

Pamphlets had been printed to be distributed to the estimated twenty thousand people who would be visiting the exhibition. They were kept in a storeroom at the Prefectural Library, and a day's worth would be taken out and delivered to the museum daily.

In the middle of the heroic battle that raged around the prizewinning work *Freedom*--and the dramatic attack by Improvement Act supporters that cast the museum into chaos--one person paid a visit to that storeroom.

It was Sugahara, the director of the Ibaraki Prefectural Library.

Sugahara, who had looked pale ever since the Library Task Force had arrived but hadn't shown any signs of fighting back, furtively carried a clear plastic container into the storeroom.

We want you to stay in the director's office as the one responsible for this mess. That's all we want from you.

That was all that the Defense Force brass had requested of Sugahara, as the final authority at the library. It was a declaration that Sugahara's authority was only recognized as a formality anymore.

Sugahara had sat in her bulletproof office. She hadn't asked how the battle was going, nor what had become of *Freedom*. Amid the terrible life-and-death struggle, no one bothered to inform Sugahara of events when she couldn't be bothered to take a more active role.

To Sugahara, the pronouncements that Genda had made when the Library Task Force arrived were far more important than trivia about some work named *Freedom*.

During your tenure, you have created a situation where the Mito Defense Force is unable to fight large-scale battles.

I'd like to see the data on how many books this library was able to protect from censorship before and after you took up your post.

A corrupt system has developed at the branch base, especially your practice of not giving the branch base commander, as a Library

Supervisor Second Class in the Defense Force, equal standing with you in disagreements.

Genda had reported back to headquarters as much about the corrupt practices in Mito as he could find, and then came to Sugahara with these declarations. She had reluctantly drawn up the data on censorship rates; they clearly showed that the number of books censored and seized had sharply increased when she became director.

Using a gun to defend culture is antithetical to democracy, Takemura and the others in the Society for Nonresistance had told her. When they had contacted her and laid out their argument, a calculating part of her had gone along because she didn't want to take responsibility for casualties due to raids during her tenure, but she also truly believed in the nobility of their philosophy.

But the data Sugahara had put together now branded her as a failure who had quickly buckled under the pressure of censorship. The supposedly noble system she had created now lay in ruins.

And Takemura and the others who had preached that noble philosophy no longer came asking for meetings with Sugahara now that her career was hanging by a thread.

After they had said in the beginning, "Let us together plant the seed of nonresistance." After they had spoken of the dazzling idea of cooperation between a citizen movement and the Ibaraki library world.

Sugahara would have to struggle against this professional crisis alone. The female officials she called her rivals would soon be too far ahead for her to ever catch up to them.

With pressure coming from every possible direction, Sugahara had reached the limit of what she could take.

"...it'll be okay as long as we aren't harboring questionable material," Sugahara muttered to herself as she took the cap off the plastic container she held. "It'll be okay as long as we aren't harboring questionable material...It'll be okay as long as we aren't harboring questionable material..."

Otherwise--

"My career will be over...My career...My career...My career..."

The library hadn't gotten a single scratch while it had martyred itself in the name of nonresistance. And now, from deciding just once to fight against censorship, it had turned into a war zone.

As long as this mountain of pamphlets is stored here, they'll come to invade and desecrate the library. And guess who will have to

budget for repairs? Guess who will have to take responsibility for the victims?

Sugahara started with the nearest box and continued down the line, pouring out the contents of the plastic container. Carefully. Deliberately.

"Pardon me, but what are you doing?" asked a soft voice, trying to avoid provoking Sugahara. When she turned around she found Supervisor Yokota, the commander of the branch base.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm taking steps so that the library won't be desecrated any further."

"Please stop," Yokota said in the same quiet voice, taking a step toward Sugahara. "Doing *this* would desecrate the library. Especially as its director."

"Have you *seen* the terrible things that have happened to the library after resisting censorship just once? The leftover pamphlets are all being stored here, you know. Who do you think they're going to hold responsible for further casualties or damage!? --Stay back!!" she screamed, swinging the plastic container at him, splashing him with some of the liquid inside.

The room was already thick with the smell of kerosene, so familiar in the winter.

"As long as you're fighting censorship, no one will hold you responsible! But if you bow to censorship and destroy the materials you've been charged with protecting, you'll be making a mistake that will haunt you your entire life!" Yokota screamed desperately, trying to throw Sugahara a last lifeline. But it only served to shorten her fuse.

"Shut up! Everything will be fine as long as we don't resist censorship!"

Sugahara flicked the lighter she was holding. Every kerosene-soaked surface went up in flames.

The fire ran in a straight orange line, until--it reached Yokota, who had also been splashed with kerosene.

His scream was like an animal's howl.

The sight of Yokota falling to the floor, writhing as he tried to put out the flames. The sudden blossom of orange. Heat.

The knowledge that she had done something irrevocable finally spurred Sugahara to action.

"Ah--Ah..." With a choked scream, Sugahara ran stumbling from the storeroom.

The automatic fire alarms resounded shrilly, and several Defense Force members came running from the other end of the hallway. Given the thick smoke billowing out of the storeroom, none of them could fail to understand the situation.

"Fire! The pamphlets are on fire!"

"Someone's in there!!"

Not even able to recognize the writhing, flame-clad shape as Yokota, one of the Force members ran to grab the fire extinguisher from its nook in the hallway. He sprayed the flaming shape, and the figure of a man laying face-down with his arms over his head emerged from the cloud of extinguishant.

"Commander Yokota!?"

Though none of them could comprehend how such a thing could have befallen Yokota, someone radioed in for help from the medical squad.

"There's a fire in the pamphlet storeroom, and Commander Yokota has been seriously burned! Call an ambulance!"

At the same time, someone shouted for a stretcher. If they carried him out themselves, the pull of his own weight would probably make his injuries worse--but neither a stretcher nor anything that would substitute could be found nearby. The fire in the storeroom burned higher and higher, racing for the open door and the oxygen outside it.

"I'll carry him on my back! Lift him on!" A burly Force member bent down, and Yokota was lifted onto his broad back by several people and carried out of the burning storeroom. "I'll carry him to the medical squad," he said, and hurried off. Even if Yokota's injuries were aggravated, it was better to carry him to the infirmary where he could be quickly loaded onto an ambulance than leave him near a fire.

"Why aren't the sprinklers working!?"

The nitrogen-based fire suppression system that was installed in every room in the library had not uttered a peep. A Force member braved the fire and pressed the emergency override switch on the wall, then ran out of the room, coughing.

"It's no good, there's a malfunction! It's almost like the central control system is in test mode!"

The man holding the radio immediately tuned in to the common channel and shouted, "Anyone close to the central control room! Turn off test mode on the sprinklers! There's a fire in the storeroom and the sprinklers aren't working!"

"I'll go too, just in case!" A Force member who was confident in his own speed ran off for the central control room.

That was when everyone suddenly noticed the woman in the gaudy, flower-print dress who was slowly inching away from the scene.

"You!" One of the Force members yanked Sugahara up by the collar. "How dare you repeat the horrors of Hino! And as the library's director...!"

Deactivating the fire suppression system and starting a fire; it was all too similar to the tactics used during the Nightmare at Hino. It was an unforgivable atrocity by those who had intended to devastate the library.

"I-I was just--just trying to protect the library--" As Sugahara babbled excuses, the others shot her looks of pure scorn.

"It's all over for you."

At another time, they might have gloated over her downfall, but the catastrophe she had caused was too grave for that. Arson and attempted murder. Following that pronouncement, Sugahara's entire existence was completely ignored.

The sprinklers came on a few minutes later. All in all, it had been a small fire that had barely damaged the storeroom, but it had nearly consumed the pamphlets. It was obvious that they would run short partway through the exhibition.

In the end, Sugahara had succeeded in her desire to rid the library of "dangerous materials." The library could only be thankful that the rest of their collection had narrowly escaped damage, since the storeroom had been emptied to make way for the pamphlets.

Yokota was transported to the Red Cross Hospital, just as Genda had been. He said only one thing, moaning as if having a nightmare:

"You were never fit to be the director of the Prefectural Library."

Later, those words would adorn the front page of the local paper, a damning accusation against Sugahara and the prefectural personnel office that had appointed her.

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The long, long opening day of the art exhibition finally came to an end, and the female Defense Force members returned to their dorm.

They were met by the apparent leaders of the Administrative Division clique.

"Hey...we have something we'd like to say."

"Yeah, what? We're dog-tired, so make it quick," Iku said, pulling off her combat boots. The rest of the girls followed suit and began to untie their laces.

"From now on, girls who aren't in the Administrative Division can freely use the mess hall and everything else too, okay?"

The phrasing caused Iku, who was greatly exhausted in both body and mind, to completely lose control.

"The hell?"

Iku shot a glare up at the Administrative Division girls from her seat in the entryway. The steely glint in her eyes had them cringing in fear.

"'You can freely use the mess hall'? Was that supposed to be an apology? And if it was, am I the one you should be apologizing to? Who were the ones you persecuted while you were colluding with Director Sugahara? Shall I refresh your memory, *bitch*?"

Iku stood up. The girls took a step back. They grew more afraid with every word. Iku's language grew more coarse with every word.

"The mess hall, and the baths, and the new washing machines, and all the rest of that shit, are *meant* to be used equally in the first place! If you're trying to make up for that idiotic system that you decided to perpetuate, you're apologizing with the wrong fucking words to the wrong fucking person!"

"Kasahara-san!" It was Nonomiya who clung to Iku, halting her. "This is our fight. We'll speak for ourselves."

"...yeah. You're right. Sorry."

Nonomiya turned to the Administrative Division girls. "I don't want to think that you're just making this overture because of what happened with Director Sugahara. But please don't forget that you've done enough things to merit that suspicion. Or that you created a hierarchy based on job description. From now on, the Defense Force and the Logistical Support Division will be allowed full and equal use of the dorm's facilities, on a first-come, first-served basis. We especially don't want any special treatment. That would just create another twisted hierarchy. Though," Nonomiya said with a thin smile, "things might be...strained between us for a while, so it might be best to time it so we don't have to run into each other."

Nonomiya was almost a different person from the constantly-apologizing girl Iku remembered.

"We also don't want to hear your apologies yet. Many of our comrades, starting with Supervisor Genda and Supervisor Yokota, have been grievously injured, and we don't have the energy to spare to deal with apologies over something this stupid. Just treat us like regular dormmates. That's all we ask."

Nonomiya's speech was magnificent. Perhaps the battle she had survived today had made her bold.

"I believe that one day the resentment between us will fade, but things can't be fixed with a single apology--our feelings just aren't that simple. And fawning over us will just generate more animosity. Please, just treat us normally."

They don't need me anymore.

Leaving her combat boots on the shoe shelf instead of taking them up to her room, Iku smiled to herself.

*

Both Genda's and Yokota's surgeries were nominally successful, but afterwards both remained in comas.

However, no one dared to wonder aloud if they would be alright. Truthfully, everyone who knew them longed to put their anxiety into words, but to mention it to others felt like tempting fate, so the Library Task Force, at least, avoided discussing anything but updates on Genda's condition.

These updates came from Orikuchi, who had raced up from Tokyo on the first day to care for Genda. It was such an extraordinary gesture that even Iku couldn't help deducing that there was a special bond between them.

As for Sugahara, she was under police investigation.

Perhaps news coverage of the violent first day of the art exhibition had paradoxically drawn more visitors, for after that day the turnout was larger than it had been in ten years.

Iku stood guard when it was her squad's turn in the rotation, but like the line for the opening of a new theme park, the wave of people rolled in in the morning and didn't recede until evening.

Her father and brother came to see the exhibition, but until they sought her out and called her name, Iku never even realized they were there.

On the evening of the third day, Yokota regained consciousness. The dorm manager made the announcement in an uncharacteristically cheerful voice in the middle of dinner, and Nonomiya and the others began to whoop with joy--until they remembered Iku's presence, and lowered their voices.

Genda still lay in a coma.

"Oh, please, don't worry about me!" Iku gestured hastily. "It's wonderful, isn't it? It's great--I'm happy too! I mean, if Supervisor Yokota is alright, surely he'll guide Commander Genda back to health as well, and they'll both come home."

"Thank God..." Someone started wailing like a child, and brought everyone else to tears as well.

Pretending to be caught up in the others' grateful tears, Iku wept as well.

Please, please, let Commander Genda return safely. He's big and loud and crazy and full of dirty tricks, but when he's our commander we always feel like things will somehow turn out right. Please, even it's just a day earlier, please let him wake up soon.

Please, please, let Supervisor Yokota really lead Commander Genda back home.

Wanting to be by herself for just a little bit, Iku didn't go to the baths with everyone else.

She sat in her room staring at her cell phone for a while, wondering if it was alright to call without a specific reason, and then punched in Doujou's number.

"What's wrong?"

As usual, he sounded ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. This time Iku laughed. "Does something have to be wrong for me to call you?"

"Statistically speaking, yes."

Under the curt tone he affected, Doujou's voice shook.

"Apparently," she began, "Supervisor Yokota has regained consciousness."

"I heard. It's good news."

"Commander Genda..." Her voice was thick with tears; with an effort, she brightened it as much as she could. "Commander Genda will wake up any minute now."

"...Yeah. I'm certain of it."

The slight pause was necessary for him to gather his strength to make a staunch reply. When Iku realized that, she could no longer maintain her brave front.

"You're right." A sob like a child's escaped her throat.

Almost superstitiously, no one had dared to discuss whether Genda would recover. Truthfully, she was anxious and unsure about whether or not he would. What she had really wanted was someone to tell her it would be alright. But everyone was just as unsure as she was, and no one could put their anxiety into words.

The men, especially, found an outlet for their worry in hard work, so they wouldn't be ashamed to stand before Commander Genda when he returned. It made it hard for Iku to even start a conversation.

"Over here, everyone's celebrating because if Supervisor Yokota is recovering, then there's no way Commander Genda won't recover when he's so much tougher."

"No fair, I wanna be over there." *Over here, I have to try so hard not to hurt the feelings of the girls who are trying so hard not to hurt mine. And I'm happy that Supervisor Yokota has regained consciousness, but it's miserable being alone.* "I wish I could have celebrated with everyone too."

"Ah. ...Sorry." Doujou voice sounded a little sullen, but she could tell by now that he was just flustered. "Look, it will be alright. I have no doubt that Commander Genda will wake up. You know how he always does crazy things--this time he just went too far, so it's gonna take him some time to recover."

They were silent for a time, and then Doujou suddenly said, "...thump."

What was that?

"I just bopped you on the head. Now stop crying."

Iku laughed until she couldn't breathe. "N-No...no fair, someone who's so damn serious all the time shouldn't be allowed to say something so stupid...Anyway," she forced down her laughter and tried teasing him in her sweetest voice, "Kasahara prefers to be patted on the head."

"Tonight's service is at an end."

Perhaps she had offended him by laughing at him, for Doujou spoke grumpily before abruptly hanging up the phone.

*

Do--

"...n't get so wound up over a little scratch, idiots..." he moaned, and then a violent coughing fit overtook him.

"Genda-kun!"

A woman's voice interrupted his coughing, as if she were used to it by now.

"Where...am I?"

"The hospital. You were shot in about twenty-three places and underwent a thirteen-hour surgery, but..." Orikuchi smiled wryly. "But when you finally regain consciousness, the first thing you do is scold your underlings. Typical."

"The...artwork?"

"Safe. It's the fifth day of the art exhibition. Your underlings are doing a fine job. So relax and enjoy your convalescence."

Genda tried to move his hand, and found that he couldn't lift it by himself. He could tell how long his recovery and rehabilitation was going to stretch, and was already fed up with the process.

Since he couldn't lift his hand as far as he expected, he set it on Orikuchi's lap. "Sorry you had to see this." At least his mouth was finally moving the way he wanted it to.

Orikuchi took the hand that rested on her lap--it was swathed in bandages--and wrapped her hand around it gently.

"I've been there for plenty of your harebrained stunts. Of course I came for this."

And then Genda saw something he hadn't seen since he moved out ten years ago--a tear slipping down Orikuchi's cheek.

"Gimme a break, you know I hate it when you cry."

"Consider it your punishment for this idiocy," Orikuchi said, tears dripping from her eyes.

"Come on, did you really think I was going to die from a little scratch like this? Don't be ridiculous."

"Most people would have. Don't be ridiculous."

"They were so incompetent that couldn't even kill me from close range, after all."

"My point is," Orikuchi raised her head, still beautiful beneath the tears. "When you left, you promised that if I was going to be wearing the red *chanchanko* on my sixtieth birthday all alone, you'd do me a favor and marry me yourself! Were you just saying that, or did you mean it!?"

Oh--She remembered. And she plans to hold me to it. A smile spread involuntarily across his face.

It hadn't been a lie. And he had meant every word. But it might have been better if Orikuchi had taken it as a joke.

"If you turn sixty, shall we make it official?"

It might have been better if she had taken that as a joke too, but Orikuchi just gave him a dark look. "You have to be *alive* for that to happen," she chided him.

"Don't get so wound up over a little scratch, idiots."

Orikuchi's swift report of Genda's awakening spread through the Library Task Force like wildfire, and they received the news with even more smiles than tears.

"Of course I'm going to get wound up!" Doujou's squad was on break. Iku slammed a fist down on the desk in the break room. "Does he know how broken-hearted I was with worry, all alone in the girls' dorm!?"

"Well, the first thing he did when he woke up was order us to stop worrying," Komaki said, chuckling.

"He might have been giving orders in his sleep the whole time he was out," Doujou added. It seemed likely.

"All of the Ibaraki groups were quite shaken," Tedzuka brought up something he had overheard. "Especially the ones from Mito, since Commander Yokota is such a quiet, gentlemanly type."

The women had been moved when Yokota regained consciousness, but even over in the men's dorm an emotional scene had unfolded. The dorm had been full of men with their arms around each other's shoulders, shedding manly tears and celebrating the good news.

"Supervisor Yokota will mainly just need plastic surgery for his burns now. Commander Genda will take three months to fully recover, and it's been said that his rehabilitation will take over half a year to complete," Komaki said.

Iku drew her brows down. "If things are so grim for the Commander, why are we laughing about it instead of crying like the Ibaraki Force members?"

"Difference in disposition, I guess."

"Difference in disposition' he says! That's all!?" Iku said, surprised.

Doujou replied in an unusually offended tone. "Well, what else would you call it?! It's not like *he's* sitting quiet and obedient in the hospital right now, in spite of just waking up. That bastard never listens, and who do you think is going to have to go around advising him to go back to the hospital, or not to strain himself? Do you understand how hard it's going to be for me?"

"Ah, that's true, he probably won't listen to anyone but Doujou," Komaki agreed.

"I'm gonna make you do it too!"

Komaki laughed and sidestepped Doujou's retort. "He does it because he likes it when you yell at him."

"I wonder if we can have him confined to this hospital until his rehabilitation is done--or at least until he's fully healed," Doujou muttered desperately. Iku had to work hard to hold back her laughter at his predictable grumpiness.

*

According to Iku's father, her mother Toshiko apparently came once to the art exhibition, in secret.

"Thanks to her height and good posture, she didn't look bad--even in that getup. Not ladylike at all, of course," she had said stiffly, standing in the kitchen with her back to Katsuhiko. Iku hadn't noticed her at all. She had snuck in, inspected Iku's performance, and snuck back home.

The chasm between Iku and her mother was deep, but for her mother, coming at all represented a compromise, and Iku was obligated to recognize that. Probably.

After the visitors had all gone home on the last day of the exhibition, the outdoor exhibits needed to be brought into the Museum of Modern Art for storage, and then the Library Task Force's assistance would no longer be needed. They would return to the Kantou Library Base the next day.

"I wonder what'll happen to this place after we leave," Doujou murmured uneasily, as he and Iku carried a framed picture together.

The Prefectural Library's director was under arrest for arson and attempted murder, and the commander of the branch base was still confined to the hospital in serious condition. Neither the director's successor nor an acting commander had been chosen yet.

Most worryingly, it still wasn't clear what kind of mark the twisted practices of Sugahara's reign would leave on the Ibaraki library world.

After they passed the picture over to the museum staff, Iku tugged on Doujou's sleeve.

"Will you come outside with me for a moment?"

"There's still work to do."

"It's pretty much done, isn't it? Just for a moment." Iku tugged a little more insistently, and Doujou reluctantly accompanied her as she set off.

The place Iku led him to was the greenhouse on the grounds of the branch base, where she and Tedzuka had once spent a break.

The structure apparently had no electricity, so the interior was lit only by the fading evening light.

"Over here, Instructor Doujou, over here!"

Remembering where they had been, Iku ran over to the cluster of bright green stems and sank down unhesitatingly. Doujou caught up with her and bent over, peeking down.

A planter was filled with rows of soft, lush vegetation, leaves joined together in a delicate lattice, all bright green. It must be almost time to transplant them.

When she had last seen them with Tedzuka, their only features had been their vivid color and their lacy leaves.

Today, they were nearly in full bloom. The luxuriantly fat yellow disc in the center of each blossom was ringed by short, snow-white petals. Each flower was no larger than her fingertip.

Far from gaudy, it was a very modest little flower.

"*Camomille*, sir."

Doujou spent a long, silent moment gazing at the simple, elegant flower.

"So this is it. ...It blooms this time of year?"

"You can plant it either in the spring or the fall, but it doesn't like the summer heat, so I've heard it's easier to keep it alive if you plant it in the fall."

Haven't you realized yet? She waited impatiently for Doujou's reaction, but he was ignorant when it came to plants and flowers, and in the end he wouldn't understand unless she told him the answer.

"Someone at this library is growing *camomille*, and has carefully researched it and knows how to care for it. Look, they've already made preparations to transplant it."

Near the planter was a well-tilled and prepared stretch of earth.

"It must be someone who knows why *camomille* is on our insignia. They must plant it every year."

There were garden tags in the planters, yellowed and cracked, and the faded letters of the word "*camomille*" had been traced over more than once. It was obvious that they had been used many times. Perhaps their caretaker was too lazy to make new tags.

"Someone at this library knows the meaning of 'strength in adversity.' So I'm sure that--"

"Okay, I get it." Doujou gave her head a rough little shake, perhaps to stop her from talking. "It's a hundred years too early for *you* to be giving *me* a pep talk."

Won't we both be dead in a hundred years? she thought. But Doujou's remark could be seen as a paradoxical acknowledgement that her pep talk had done its job, so she didn't say anything.

Doujou stood. "Now all that's left is going out for tea. Find a place after we get back to Tokyo," he said, and left.

He still remembers that promise? she marveled, and couldn't entirely suppress the grin that broke out across her face.

*

Though the atmosphere in the girls' dorm was still somewhat strained, access to the facilities was starting to approach the level of equality. It might be much better next year, when the new recruits started showing up, and many things would begin to become water under the bridge.

On the day of her departure, the female Defense Force members, beginning with Nonomiya, came down to the entryway to see her off.

Their departure would take place right after a farewell ceremony attended by the prefectural governor, senior government functionaries, and museum officials, so this would be the last time she and they would be able to talk directly to each other. Ogata had politely but firmly declined the ceremony many times, but he was pressed until he finally gave way. "A short one! As short as possible!" he begged, and it was decided.

"Kasahara-saan..." Nonomiya was half-crying already.

What with one thing and another, they had spent nearly a month in close company, which made their parting all the more melancholy.

Iku didn't want her departure to turn into a gloomy event, so she shouldered her backpack and stood up briskly. "Chin up. You've got a tough road ahead of you, so hang in there."

The Administrative Division girls were blithely ignoring Iku and the other girls as much as ever. Iku didn't want everyone breaking down into tears, considering the animosity that still existed between the two groups.

"And marksmanship! If you get any worse than you are now they'll kick you out, so practice! I'm on the borderline as it is!" Iku finished in a loud, cheerful voice, walked out of the girls dorm where she had spent such a short time--or such a long time--and put it behind her.

Iku's father was technically at the ceremony, but all they could do was exchange looks from their respective places. She didn't remember anything after boarding the bus. Everyone but the driver was dead to the world, and even the drivers rotated more often than they had on the trip up. It was proof of the exhaustion they were all feeling.

They got back to the Kantou Library Base, gathered to hear a short briefing, and then adjourned. They had been given today and the next day off, and Iku had no sooner gotten back to her room and stripped off her uniform before she was crawling into bed.

*

When she woke up, the sun had completely set, and since the curtain was still up the room was completely dark. Or had been, until the just-arrived Shibasaki had switched on the light.

"Welcome back!"

Iku looked at the friend she hadn't seen in some time, backlit by the fluorescent light behind her. Despite the backlighting, she was still as flawless a beauty as ever.

"Come on, if you keep sleeping like that the mess hall and the baths are gonna close. Get up, get up!"

Shibasaki propped her up through dinner and a bath, and then they went back to their room again.

"Bravo to you," Shibasaki said in an unwontedly serious tone as she brewed the very best of their black tea. "I know it was a very hard time, in a lot of ways." There was Genda, of course, and there was

Shindou, shot through the arm, and the rest of the innumerable wounded. "Apparently it'll take two months until Commander Genda can be transferred to our local hospital."

"I see you haven't changed a bit..." The timing of Genda's transfer was information that probably not even Ogata, the assistant commander, knew yet. "Instructor Doujou said he wishes we could leave him at the other hospital until his rehabilitation is over."

She mentioned Doujou's name without thinking--and then suddenly it hit her. Her vision blurred with tears.

"Shibasakiiii..."

As tears slipped quietly down her cheeks, Iku looked down at her lap. She couldn't see Shibasaki's expression.

Hypothetically speaking.

Even hypothetically speaking, just imagining it was painful.

"I'm sorry, Shibasaki. Turns out, I love Instructor Doujou after all."

She could no longer say she didn't care. Even if, hypothetically speaking, her rival was Shibasaki, the selfish, wanton envy that welled up at the thought of him being taken from her could no longer be denied. She was forced to recognize it within herself.

"You're *finally* admitting it?" Shibasaki said, stroking Iku's head consolingly. "It's okay, I've known that you loved Instructor Doujou for a long time."

When Shibasaki said the words out loud, they felt true--like she really had loved him for a long time. Like Tedzuka Satoshi's bombshell had just been the drop that broke the dam.

"Don't worry, this is the man who flat-out rejected me when I asked him out. I mean, usually if a knockout like me approaches a guy, he has to think about it for a second, right? There is no way you're gonna lose him to me."

Iku was slightly relieved--and then had a slightly sneaky urge.

"How does Instructor Doujou feel about me?"

"I'm not going to tell you," Shibasaki said firmly. "I wouldn't be guessing; I know. Go and put your emotions at his mercy; let his every word and deed bring you to the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. That's how virgins work, isn't it?"

Yikes. It sounded mortifying when Shibasaki put it so bluntly.

"Falling in love with the person you're trying to catch up to is a classic pattern. Just keep running; those legs of yours have gotten you through every problem you've faced so far."

"Okay," Iku nodded, hugging her knees to her chest. "I wonder if I've grown up at all?" she murmured, half to herself.

Shibasaki answered her honestly. "You just came home from your first large-scale battle without a scratch on you--that's impressive, isn't it? I haven't heard anyone say you faltered."

"What did Instructor Doujou say?"

Iku wondered if this question too was against the rules, but Shibasaki rewarded her with an answer. "He said you had a shitload of courage. That's pretty much the highest compliment he could give you, no?"

A helpless blush spread across her cheeks, and Iku dropped her face to her knees.

*

Once they had finished assisting with the art exhibition and pulled out, their link to the Ibaraki Prefecture headquarters at Mito should have ended there. But it didn't.

At a meeting of top brass at the Kantou Library Base headquarters office, Assistant Commander Hikoe's expression was growing more stony by the minute.

"'Sharing the blame'!?"

Inamine nodded.

"Ridiculous!" Hikoe spat. "The Kantou Library Base deployed the entire Library Task Force, saved the exhibition's prizewinning work, and then helped patrol the exhibition until the very last day! Thanks to that, Supervisor Genda needs over six months to recover from the wounds he received! As for Ibaraki, their library director committed arson and attempted murder on top of everything else! What on earth would require this Force to share blame with Ibaraki!"

Unlike Inamine, he was with the governmentalist faction, but he still cared very much about the Library Force, and he was right.

In his usual mild tone, Inamine amended his statement. "I apologize; of course phrasing it as blame-sharing would lead to such a misunderstanding. To be more accurate, it is not the Tokyo headquarters that will be sharing the blame with the Ibaraki headquarters; it is the Kantou Library Force, which bears some responsibility for this incident. This may take some time to explain," he warned. The top brass, especially the governmentalists, looked uniformly disgruntled but settled in to listen. "At first, we thought half

of the Library Task Force would be sufficient, but in the end we deployed the entire Force. This was due to the fact that according to the reports of the first squads to arrive, the Library Force at Mito--especially at the branch base attached to the Prefectural Library--had become severely warped."

"I heard that it was the Prefectural Library director's personal biases that caused the status of the Defense Force members to go down," Hikoe interjected crossly. "That's Mito's problem."

"Incidentally, there was a citizen's group that had such a close relationship with that director that one might call it collusive. They are apparently called the Society for Nonresistance..."

When Sugahara was assigned to the post of Prefectural Library director, she thought of the post as nothing more than a sinecure and was eager to move on. The only thing that made her anxious was the idea of casualties during her tenure, and this anxiety began to lead to small and large confrontations with the Defense Force.

That was when the Society for Nonresistance contacted Sugahara.

They came with honeyed words of admiration, and whispered that she should make the noble principles of unwavering respect for life and adherence to a pacifist philosophy the defining characteristics of the Mito Library Force.

"I'm sure everyone is aware of what befell Mito after that."

Books were offered up to the censors without a struggle, the rights of the Defense Force were whittled away, and the Force's defensive abilities were eroded.

In order to spread their methods throughout Ibaraki, the Society for Nonresistance wormed their way into every branch library in the prefecture. The fact that things were already going their way at Mito, the central base of Ibaraki, laid the foundation for this action. Lawfully-armed organizations are weak in the face of citizen groups preaching respect for human life above all.

"However, among the donors to this Society for Nonresistance, we have identified several groups that support the Media Improvement Act--though of course they took pains to conceal their identities."

The room broke into an ominous uproar.

"So that means...they were--?" a voice rose in inquiry, and Inamine nodded.

"It is fair to think of the Society for Nonresistance as an Improvement Act advocates' group in disguise, who saw Director

Sugahara as an easy mark and tried to undermine the Library Force from within, starting with the rural areas." Inamine folded his hands, his expression grave. "Contact with citizen groups is a matter left up to the discretion of each command, and it's very difficult to know where to draw the line. There are reputable groups, but there are also many that act as fronts to conceal evil ends. Indeed it takes a certain amount of contact with these groups to tell one from the other, and this time Director Sugahara was too easily entangled in their schemes. Director Sugahara never wanted to work at the library, and her eagerness to get back to the prefectural government was probably one of the reasons it was so easy to make her dance to their tune."

"In that case, it was the Ibaraki government personnel office that blundered," Hikoe spat. As a governmentalist, it must have been mortifying to say so. "I certainly have serious doubts whether the entire Kantou Library Force bears the blame!"

"But if we turn our backs on Ibaraki, we set a precedent," Inamine warned them. "No matter what the other circumstances were, the fact remains that we will be making this statement: that any command that is infiltrated by cleverly-disguised hostile organizations will be left on its own to pay for its mistakes. Is that in accordance with the ideals of the Library Force?" Inamine asked.

No one answered.

If that precedent were established, eventually contact and cooperation between libraries and citizen groups would fall to a minimum, and in the long term, trust between Library Force commands would break down.

"Every region of this country has a corresponding Library Force central base, even if it's just for convenience. The Kantou Library Base fulfills that role for the Kantou region. The command at Ibaraki will take the blame it should take, but the Kantou Library Base also needs to take some of that blame--for not realizing until now that a branch of the Kantou Library Force was headed for disaster."

The mood in the room had grown so heavy that no one else could hold their head up.

Inamine addressed them brightly. "Which means that it was a piece of good fortune that *Freedom* was chosen for the Ibaraki prefectural art exhibition this year. If the prizewinning work hadn't rubbed the Media Improvement Committee the wrong way, the Task Force would have never been sent as reinforcements, and we wouldn't have discovered the corruption at Mito. It might not have come to our

attention until years later, when it was much worse. And then my dismissal alone wouldn't have been enough to atone for our inaction."

"...Wait a minute!" Hikoe pounded his fist on the table and jumped to his feet. "This problem originated with the mistake made by the government personnel office in Ibaraki! If anyone is going to take responsibility for this, as governmentalist, I would be a much more appropriate choice!"

"Keep the base commander and leave the assistant commander out to dry? That wouldn't sit well with the Force or the rest of the world." Inamine laughed gently. "I'm sixty-six years old. That's retirement age to most people."

Hikoe was still standing, but his head had drooped, like he didn't know where to look.

"In terms of age, rank...and factional affiliation, you're the only logical choice for my successor. In the wake of the Ibaraki incident, the government personnel office will probably be reined in to a certain extent, and the Kantou Library Base has been under the control of a principlist for a long time. It only makes sense to let the next commander be a governmentalist and see how things play out. I'll officially give you my blessing as successor."

Hikoe lifted his head and looked hard at Inamine. "...If so, I want you to stay on with the Force as a special advisor. If you up and left right now, I wouldn't be able to govern the Force alone. For one thing, I don't have the personal information network that you seem to have." Hikoe's tone was sardonic as he referred to Inamine's experimental intelligence department. It would take time to bring the project to full maturity and hand the reins over to someone else.

"I accept, as long as my responsibilities are mostly limited to lending my name to your plans. But I have a request of my own." Hikoe looked dubious, and Inamine smiled. "Allow me one final, slightly excessive use of my power over personnel decisions."

*

Genda, still on complete bed rest at the Red Cross Hospital, received a letter with his new orders while he was still unable to move by himself.

Since he couldn't use his hands, someone else broke the seal for him--Orikuchi, who was still in town writing an article on the dark side of the Ibaraki library world and staying in a nearby hotel.

"On this day, November 30th of the 33rd year of the Seika era, I hereby promote Library Supervisor Third Class Genda Ryuusuke to Library Supervisor First Class...signed, Inamine Kazuichi, Commander of the Kantou Library Base."

Genda sat silently for a long time after Orikuchi had finished reading, giving no response. Orikuchi didn't know all the ins and outs of the Library Force, but she did know that it was unheard of to promote a Library Supervisor by two ranks, unless they had died in the line of duty.

And that Genda understood the full meaning of his promotion.

At length Genda asked Orikuchi for his pointing stick. Since he still couldn't move as much as he liked, he used it to point out to Orikuchi the things that he wanted.

Orikuchi extended the telescoping rod and handed it over. Genda, gazing fixedly into space, brought the end of the rod up to his forehead in a salute. It was the way that police officers whose arms had been injured or lost saluted.

"I, Library Supervisor First Class Genda Ryuusuke, accept this promotion!"

Oh! Commander Inamine--

It was this recitation that made Orikuchi finally understand.

By the time Genda returned to the Kantou Library Base, Inamine would already be gone.

*

"What is the meaning of this!?" Iku snapped in an almost instinctive reaction to the news Assistant Commander Ogata had given during morning announcements.

"I just explained that. If you want more information, your squad leaders will give it to you during your meetings."

At this implicit plea to control his subordinate, Doujou put a hand on Iku's shoulder and forced her back down into her seat. "Calm down."

"But--!"

How am I supposed to calm down!? Next to her, Tedzuka's face was white. The only reason Doujou and Komaki were calm was that as

squad leader and assistant squad leader, they had heard the news ahead of time.

Why didn't they tell us? Not fair.

"How could Inamine resign!? Is this some governmentalist plot!?"

"Watch your mouth!" Doujou shouted, then dropped his voice down to a low murmur. "Assistant Commander Hikoe apparently offered to resign instead since the screwup at Ibaraki was caused by the government personnel office. It was Commander Inamine's choice to resign."

"...Sorry." She hadn't imagined that Hikoe would put forth such an offer.

Iku had been subdued, but next to her Tedzuka wasn't ready to give up. "I wonder if my brother--"

"You do an injustice to your brother," Komaki said. "I can't think that these are the methods that he prefers. He likes to be seen above all as an ideological leader crusading to eradicate censorship. Though it's possible that he realized what was happening and didn't warn the rest of the Force. A certain weakening of the Library Force would be very convenient for the Library of Tomorrow Project."

Perhaps even Komaki was feeling prickly, for it was a harsh way to speak about someone else's family. Though to be fair, Tedzuka didn't protest--he was always rather harsh about his brother himself.

During his lunch break, Tedzuka headed over to the Musashino First Library.

He quickly found Shibasaki on her feet working and stepped up to her briskly.

"Come with me for a second."

"What if I said no?"

"Just come here!" Tedzuka grabbed Shibasaki's wrist and started walking. He faltered for a moment as he felt how thin it was, but he didn't let go as he led her out of the reference room.

"You knew, didn't you?"

He was talking about the phone call he and Shibasaki had had after his arrival at Mito.

"That Commander Inamine would have to take responsibility for the situation at Mito, and that my brother knew the secret behind the Society for Nonresistance and kept quiet about it."

"...Remember not to rely on him too much. These days he's the spiritual leader of the Library of Tomorrow Project first, and your brother second."

Shibasaki's uncharacteristically personal warning served as proof that she had known.

"Calm down. Your brother knew what was happening, but all he did was stay silent. We don't know his reasons, and it's not like he directly forced Commander Inamine to resign."

"But..." Except for that strange warning, she had sounded completely normal over the phone. Tedzuka had gone over the conversation in his mind a hundred times. It was maddening. "Why didn't you say anything to me!?"

"Because by the time I could have told you, there was nothing you could do!" Shibasaki shouted, and then looked down at her feet. Her voice grew low. "No matter what, the circumstances that would force Commander Inamine to take responsibility were already in place. What would have been the point of giving you all information that would only distress you? The Library Force at Mito had been eaten away by the Society for Nonresistance until it was falling apart and they were far from prepared for the coming battle. Didn't you have enough worries without me adding to them? There--" Shibasaki's breath caught. "There was nothing I could do but ask you to get through the battle and come home safe!"

Shibasaki shook off Tedzuka's hand, and Tedzuka released her wrist reflexively. Her wrist was so slender, it seemed like it might break if he grabbed it too roughly.

Shibasaki immediately turned on her heel and walked away. Her footsteps were heavy, as if she were resisting the impulse to run, and they retreated into the distance.

When Tedzuka looked down at the place where she had been standing, he saw several drops of water scattered over the linoleum floor.

He was stunned by the realization that he had somehow made this woman cry, when she never cried in front of other people. He stood, uncertain, for a very long time, until he finally decided against chasing after Shibasaki or calling Satoshi.

From Satoshi's perspective, it was self-evident that as long as Inamine was in the Library Force, his charisma would be an impediment to Satoshi's plans. Of course he wouldn't have told

Tedzuka that Inamine was in danger of defeat until it was too late. Tedzuka had been shown over and over that Satoshi wasn't that kind of brother.

But still, Shibasaki had feared that Tedzuka might get hurt and taken the time to warn him.

He knelt down on the floor and scrubbed at the droplets with his fist. Shibasaki surely hadn't wanted to leave them here.

"I'm such an asshole..."

He had taken out his frustration at his own powerlessness on an equally powerless but more delicate girl.

So taking out his frustration on his brother probably wasn't a good idea either.

After all, the only reason he talked to Satoshi was for the smattering of useful information he was able to squeeze out of him.

*

"You know what?" Iku said that evening.

Shibasaki was staring blankly at the television and didn't even notice Iku talking to her.

"Earth to Shibasaki!"

"What? Oh, um, what is it?"

Seeing the normally impervious Shibasaki flustered, Iku folded her arms and frowned. "So you really did have a fight!"

"What do you mean!? With whom?"

"Tedzuka," she said baldly. Shibasaki winced. *I guess you could call that a fight, if you wanted to.*

"He kinda apologized. Said to tell you 'sorry,'" Iku continued.

How am I supposed to respond to that? "...'No, I'm sorry'? Does that work?"

"Well, it's not *wrong*--" Iku raised her eyebrows and began peeling one of the oranges that sat on her desk. "--But it's a little trite, don't you think?"

"Well, I don't know what would be *right*." She pretended nonchalance, but she was actually serious.

"What about something more reconciliatory, like 'I'm sorry too' or 'don't worry about it'?"

"Okay, could you tell him something like that?"

"...I am not your voice-mail service," Iku grumbled, stuffing orange sections into her mouth. "So, you two can fight with each other now?"

Shibasaki grew flustered again at this second surmise of Iku's. "I probably shouldn't fight with people. You know, as an intelligence cadet."

"No, it's good. It means you're friends, right?"

Oh. We've gotten to be friends? Used to thinking of him as a peer and collaborator, Tedzuka's position shifted a little in her mind.

*

If one counted the transitional period, December 14th was Inamine's last day at work.

The only thing he took from his desk was a small pot of *camomille*, which he put in his bag and placed on his lap. Without two legs, even superficial gardening was strenuous work, but he planted *camomille* in the summer and the fall, and every year when it started to bloom he culled a few of the plants and put them in a pot on his desk.

So, my dear.

Looking down at the simple clay pot, he spoke silently.

What would you think of what I've done?

If his wife had lived. It was a question he had always dismissed as pointless, but he was asking it now.

If you had lived, what would you have said about the things I've done? About the way I had the Library Force arm itself so it could oppose censorship? About the organization I created that spills blood to fight censorship?

Inamine didn't know how his wife would answer. No voice of comfort or encouragement would reach his ears. One could not ask for aid from the dead. Even from one's wife. He would not justify himself by putting words in his wife's mouth, when she couldn't speak for herself anymore.

He knew it would be wrong, even without being told by his detractors, who used his dead wife to denounce him.

But the Library Force had been created, and would continue to exist even after Inamine left, and would continue to battle censorship. And even after Inamine left, the blood that was shed would still be on his hands. And after he died, as the architect of the Library Force, that blood would continue to stain his hands even in the grave.

And though his own body was frail, he had ordered young men and women to carry out that bloodshed for him.

I may be beyond redemption.

There was a soft knock, and the door of his office opened. On the other side were Shibasaki, his direct subordinate--and Chief Librarian Kasahara, who had once called Inamine "sir" as if he were a patron.

"It's time," Shibasaki said. "Are you ready to go?"

"I am."

"Then we will see you to your car."

Kasahara approached his wheelchair.

"Thank you. I'm indebted to you for your help during the kidnapping as well."

Kasahara pulled the wheelchair away from the desk and began to push it. "No," she cried, "it was an honor to be by your side. I wish I could have done more for you--" Her voice grew choked with tears. "I wish I could still work under you. Is there really no way--"

"Kasahara," Shibasaki said warningly. Behind him, Iku's sobs continued for a long time. It was a little unsettling to Inamine, to hear himself mourned by this young Defense Force woman.

They exited the building, and Inamine's eyes grew wide.

"Did you arrange this?" he asked Shibasaki.

Shibasaki grinned. "No, sir. Everyone who was free came of their own volition. That's why they aren't lined up in any kind of order."

Library Force members stood in two long rows, lining both sides of the road that led up to the main entrance of the base. Though the road curved out of sight at some point, the rows continued along it.

First in line were every single member of the Library Task Force.

Assistant Commander Ogata shouted from deep in his belly.

"WE SALUTE COMMANDER INAMINE OF THE KANTOU LIBRARY BASE!"

Members of the Defense Force, Administrative Division, and Logistical Support Division were all jumbled together in the lines, but they all saluted in unison. It charmed Inamine that even the Administrative Division and Logistical Support Division members, who weren't used to saluting, executed them well.

Inamine saluted back, and Kasahara began to push his wheelchair. Shibasaki set out alongside them.

He saluted again every time they turned a corner, until at last they reached the car parked in front of the main entrance. It was the same car that had picked up Inamine almost every day since he became base commander.

In front of the car stood Hikoe, who would become base commander tomorrow.

Silently, he opened the back door, and Inamine moved his body into the back seat in a practiced maneuver. Kasahara folded the wheelchair, and Inamine took it and placed it at the foot of the seat next to him.

Hikoe saluted and gazed down at Inamine in the car for a long moment, then began to speak.

"I must beg your pardon; though I'm keeping you on as a special advisor, I won't be following your doctrine. I have my own beliefs, and I'll simply be managing the Library Force according to those beliefs."

Kasahara, rumored to be second to none when it came to the simple and straightforward, looked like she was ready to make some objection; Shibasaki poked her in the side and she subsided sullenly. For people like her, the Library Force was probably about to become a slightly more tense place.

That prediction was why he had hastened Genda's promotion--but what would the Library Force actually be like after he was gone?

Hikoe continued, "But I don't think that the principlists and the governmentalists disagree over the fundamental ideals of the Library Force. In a world where an incident like the one at Mito can happen, I think that we'll be able to find compromises that fit the situation, whatever the differences in our beliefs. I think your wisdom and experience will be a great help. I look forward to continuing to work with you."

Hikoe bowed so low that the thinning hair on the top of his head was visible, and then shut the car door. The driver said, "Here we go," as he had every day, and started the car in time with his scrupulous warning, as he had every day.

Inamine continued to lovingly stroke the pot of *camomille* on his lap.

I may be beyond redemption, but at least I've always had plenty of people who understood what I was working for.

It had been over twenty years since the Nightmare at Hino.
Today was the day that the old man who had created the Library Force and lead it into the present day retired from the front lines.

...To be continued.